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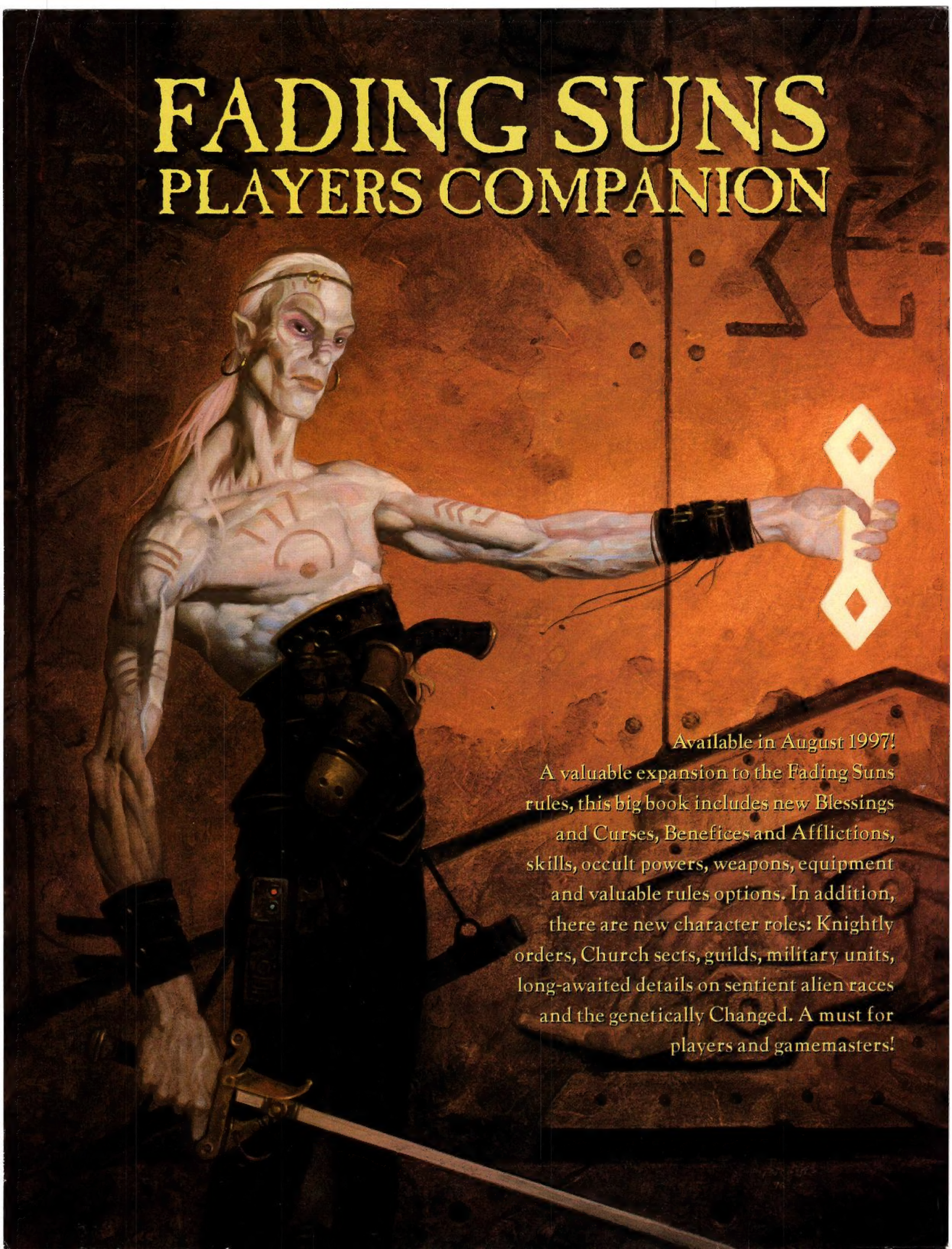
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SHADIS Magazine
Issue #38
Volume VI
Number I

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SHADIS Magazine

is published monthly by the

Alderac Entertainment Group

4045 Guasti Road, Suite 212

Ontario, CA 91761

(909) 390-5444

Fax: (909) 390-5446

Shadis2@aol.com

Yearly subscription rates in U.S. funds are as follows: $20.00 – U.S., $40.00 – CAN, $60.00 – Overseas

Make checks payable to SHADIS. Advertising rates can be obtained by writing to the above address. Send SASE for Writers' & Artists' Guidelines.

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Editorial

I Swear to God, I Thought Turkeys Could Fly

For those of you who have seen *Batman and Robin* by now, allow me to express my condolences. The Alderac staff took in a group screening, and we still haven't recovered from the trauma. John Wick has solemnly sworn to kill everyone associated with the production. Steve Hough sat hunched in a corner for three days, whispering "Frank Miller will save us, Frank Miller will save us," over and over again. And Cris Dornaus has developed a recurring facial tic that frightens pets and small children.

Yes sir, it makes you long for the days of quality comic book films like *Howard the Duck*.

The breathtaking incompetence displayed by Joel Schumacher's big-budget roadkill has been exceeded only by the box office receipts it's stacked up since opening. Apparently, being really REALLY bad hasn't deterred anyone from seeing it — or any of the other cinematic disasters littering this summer like so much cow flop.

Not that this is new of course; it's been going on for years, and was punctuated last year when a glorified B-movie called *Independence Day* actually drew comparisons to to the canonical touchstone *Star Wars*. (Anyone who continues to adhere to this philosophy should report to the nearest Processing Center for their lobotomies. It's better this way. Really.) Movies — especially science fiction and action movies, which gamers tend to groove on — have achieved a creative vacuum so intense that not even hope can escape.

What happened? How did we get from Charlton Heston screaming at the Statue of Liberty to Uma Thurman doing a bad Mae West imitation? It's easy to blame Hollywood, of course; they're arrogant, money-grubbing little worms, so they make good whipping boys. But the fact remains that they only respond to market demands; they make what they think we want to see, and if what we want to see is crap... so be it. Sci-fi fans are particularly culpable, because we're known for going to see the same movies again and again. Producer Larry Kasanoff was recently quoted in the *L.A. Times*, stating that "the fan base of science fiction goes to these movies 10 times. Those kids get out of the theater and go right back in line."

Translation: they depend on us, the fanboys, to see their film. Multiple times. And apparently, we're such undemanding little lemmings that the quality of the movie doesn't matter. As long as stuff blows up real good, we'll keep flocking back in droves and they'll keep cranking out more of it.

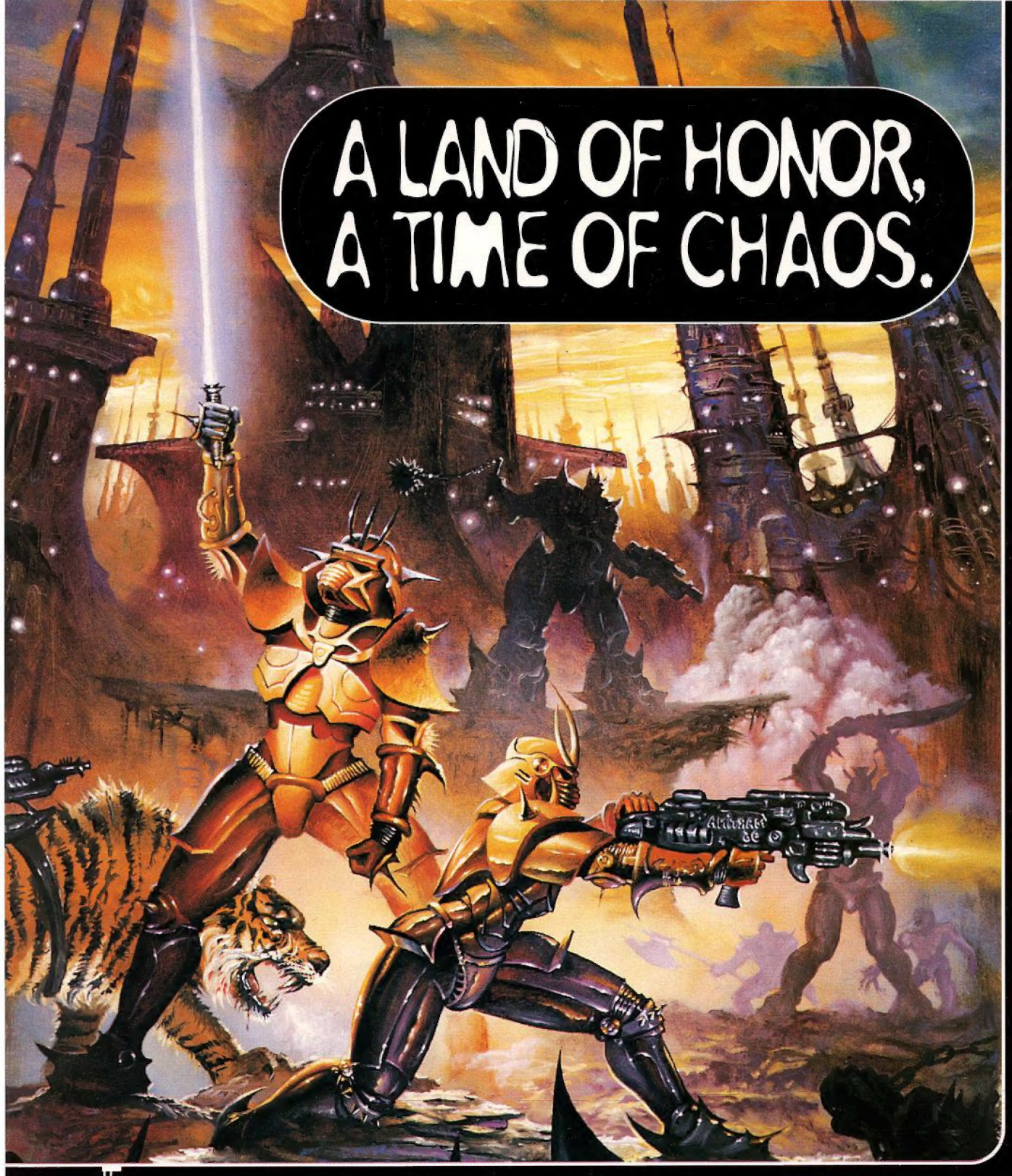
The real tragedy, of course, is that sci-fi fans tend to be smarter than the average bear. Once upon a time, the sci-fi films that mattered were considered too intellectual for most movie-goers. We thralled to the enigmas of *2001* and pondered the implications of *Blade Runner*, admiring the spectacle they provided without being limited to it. Somewhere along the line, we sold out our desire to question and argue in favor of the empty thrills of whooshing space-ships. Smart, active engagement has been replaced by mindless stimulus response. "Watch the pretty lights, kids, and you'll have fun. There's drool cups in the lobby if you need them."

Special effects in and of themselves aren't the problem. Science fiction has thrived on them, and a certain amount is both expected and desired in most films of the genre. The two movies mentioned above depend a great deal on spectacle, using it to entice the imaginations and challenge the perceptions of their viewers (to say nothing of more obscure films like *Solaris* — an intellectual fog bank of a movie which is solely dependent on spectacle). The problem is that we seem incapable of looking past the effects, asking how they connects to the characters and plot, or why they look the way they do. Spectacle has become the end rather than the means; and until we as a fan base decide that that isn't enough, that end is all we'll ever get.

There's still hope. *Contact*, based on the book by überbrain Carl Sagan, is due out later this month, and *Men In Black* promises a little wit and imagination at the very least. The future is still unwritten, and there's always a chance that the cinematic blunders of 1998 will bomb like a turkey from a B-52. But until we start expecting more out of our movies — as entertainment, as intelligent discourse, as something worth spending eight bucks on — these hopeful signs will vanish. And all we'll have left are the drool cups, watching an endless parade of explosions like a coma ward on the Fourth of July. If that happpens, we'll have no one to blame but ourselves.

Oh, and a note to Joel Schumacher: let Adam West be silly. He's better at it than you.

— *Rob Vaux*



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1. Do you believe that extraterrestrial life has visited this planet?
   (A) Yes
   (B) No
   (C) None of the above
   (D) I didn't understand the question
   (E) Define "visit"

2. How many alien life forms have given you a free set of steak knives?
   (A) 1
   (B) 2-6
   (C) 7-32.5
   (D) I had to pay for mine
   (E) I am an alien

3. If a train is leaving New York City at 25 mph and a flying saucer is leaving Saturn with a crate of Argosian fizzle-garglers at 9,675.3 mph, how long until the world ends?
   (A) 5 minutes
   (B) 1 day
   (C) Depends on what the train engineer had for breakfast
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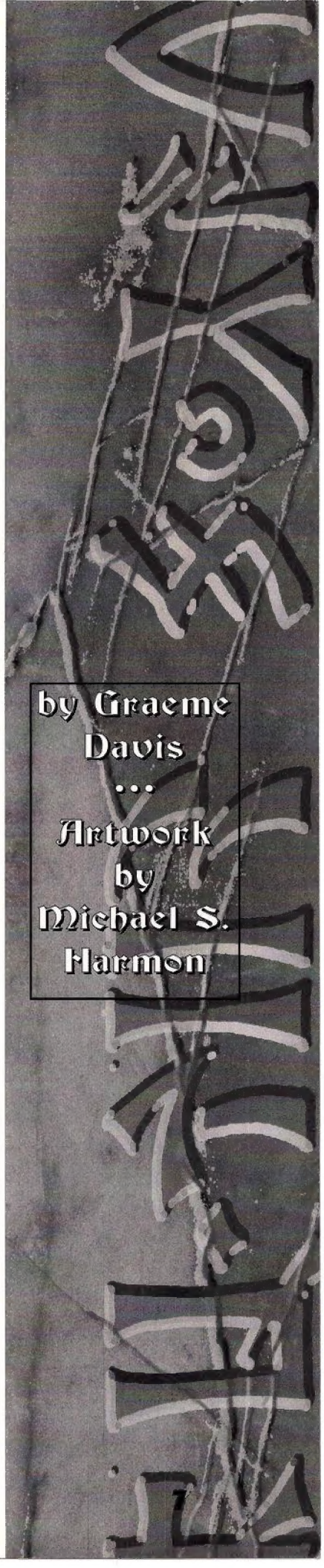
Mind Over Matter

Psychic Powers in Call of Cthulhu

by Graeme Davis
...
Artwork by Michael S. Harmon



The 1920s was a period of great interest not only in the occult but in all areas of what today would be called the paranormal. Spiritualism and psychic ability were two major areas of interest, and since many of Lovecraft's characters moved in occult and mystic circles, the *Call of Cthulhu* keeper might find the following rules useful in dealing with psychic talents and phenomena.

The Psychic Talents

The major talents covered in this article are Telepathy, Mediumship, Clairvoyance, Telekinesis, Spirit Travel and Faith Healing. Each talent confers a number of abilities, which are described below.

Determining Psychic Talent

Any character with a POW score of 17 or more may have some psychic ability. When such a character is generated, make a POW x 1 roll; if the roll succeeds, the character is gifted with psychic ability.

Once a character has been found to be psychic, make a POW x 3 roll for each of the six talents listed above. Each successful roll indicates a talent which the character possesses; note each one on the character sheet. Next, roll a D4 for each talent the character possesses, and multiply the result by the character's POW score — this is the character's base score in the talent, and is used in the same way as a skill score.

If a character is found to have psychic ability but all the talent rolls are failed, you can take one of two courses, according to the Keeper's preference. The character might be considered to have a latent psychic talent, or he/she might have a single weak talent, chosen by the Keeper or determined randomly by a D6 roll. If a character has a single weak talent, his/her basic score is equal to D4 x half POW.

A character with latent psychic ability can develop it in a number of ways: by spending a week with a psychically gifted character, for instance, or by receiving a severe nervous shock such as the loss of 3 or more SAN points at a single time. When these circumstances arise, the character is permitted to check each of the six talents with a POW x 2 roll — the player may choose the order of the checks, but only one talent may be obtained. If no talents are obtained, the process may be repeated the next time the circumstances are favourable. Note that a character with latent psychic ability may only ever develop a single talent — this is treated as a weak talent, with the basic score being D4 x half current POW.

For example: Philip Moorgrave, a newly-created character, has a POW score of 17. A POW x 1 roll of 04 indicates that he is psychic. His POW x 3 roll is 51, and he checks each of the talents in turn to see where his psychic abilities lie. The first roll is 83, indicating that he is not a telepath; his second roll is 53, so he is not a medium. The third roll is 21, making him clairvoyant, and a D4 roll of 3 gives him 3 x 17 = 51 points in that skill. The fourth roll is 78, denying him telekinesis, and a fifth roll of 63 indicates that he has no talent for spirit travel. The sixth and final roll is 11, indicating that he is a faith healer; a D4 roll of 1 gives him just 17 points in that skill.

Edwin Petheridge, on the other hand, has a POW of 18, and a POW x 1 roll of 11 indicates that he is psychically gifted. However, disastrous rolls of 62, 56, 94, 64, 73 and 80 deny him any ability. The Keeper decides that Edwin has a latent psychic ability which has yet to be determined. Meeting Philip Moorgrave later in the campaign, Edwin studies with him for a week in an attempt to develop the psychic talent he feels sure he possesses. A POW x 2 roll of 76 indicates that the attempt is a failure. Later, Edwin receives a severe nervous shock as a result of an unexpected meeting with a Shoggoth — to be precise, he loses 4 SAN points. Is Edwin's psychic talent awakened at

last? Edwin's player wants him to be clairvoyant — possibly to avoid future unexpected meetings — but a POW x 2 roll of 53 denies him that talent. Next in order of preference is telepathy, and the POW x 2 roll is 22 — Edwin is telepathic. A D4 roll produces a result of 3, and 3 x 9 (half Edwin's POW) = 27. Edwin has 27 points in his Telepathy skill.

Using Psychic Abilities

The use of any psychic ability requires absolute and uninterrupted concentration. The psychic may not move nor engage in any kind of activity while attempting to use a psychic ability. If a psychic is attacked or subjected to any other kind of physical contact while using a psychic ability, he/she must make a POW x 5 roll, with a 10% penalty for every point of damage caused by a successful attack. If this roll is failed, concentration is broken and the use of the psychic ability is abruptly curtailed.

Some psychic abilities carry certain risks. If a critical failure (96-00) is rolled while using telepathy, clairvoyance or mediumship, the psychic may unwittingly have made contact with some malign entity, possibly a minor Mythos being; at the Keeper's discretion, a really spectacular failure (00) might even involve accidental contact with Nyarlathotep himself. Critical failure with telekinesis may result in loss of control, possibly resulting in injury to the psychic or an uncontrolled burst of poltergeist-like activity; any failure at all while levitating could be uncomfortable to say the least. The risks of spirit travel are explained in the relevant section below. A critical failure in faith healing might result in the patient's condition worsening, or even being transferred to the would-be healer. These are only suggestions, and the Keeper should try to be imaginative when dealing with critical failures.

Telepathy

The talent of telepathy permits the user to engage in mind-to-mind communication. This communication may be used in various ways; the individual abilities permitted by telepathy are as follows:

Detect Sentient Being: On a successful telepathy roll, the psychic may detect the presence of any minds of INT 3+ within a radius of POW x 10 feet. The presence, number and rough direction of intelligent minds will be known, but no other information will be gained. At the Keeper's option, this ability might be used to detect incorporeal beings such as ghosts.

Read Thoughts: This ability permits the user to sense the surface thoughts of one creature within the psychic's field of vision. Thought-reading costs 1 Magic Point per round. One character who is well known to the psychic may be sensed over a wider range by a further expenditure of Magic Points, as follows:

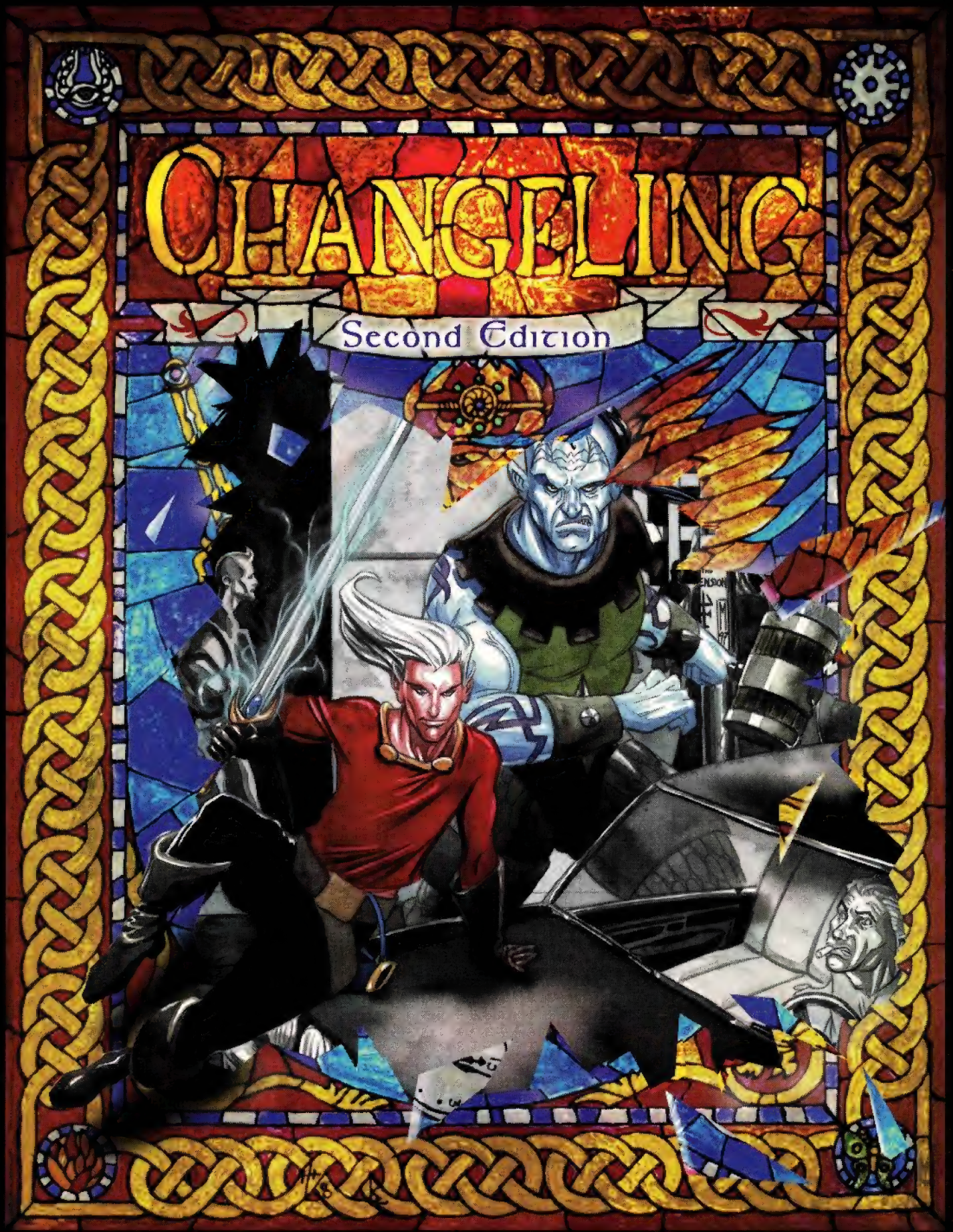
MP cost/Round	Distance in miles
1	1
2	10
3	100
4	1,000
5	10,000

The subject of such observation may detect the intruding mind on a successful POW x 5 roll, modified downwards by half the observer's telepathy score. Once the thought-reading is detected, the subject may resist it by matching Magic Points with the psychic; this may be attempted once per round.

A successful telepathy roll is necessary to use this ability, and once this level of rapport is reached the telepath may attempt to send a communication (see below) on the following round. If both parties are telepaths, Magic Point costs are halved, and the receiver may opt to share the costs; additionally, telepathy rolls are made at a bonus equal to one-tenth of the receiver's telepathy score.

Communication: In order to send a communication, the psychic must first have successfully established the basic rapport necessary to read thoughts (see above). On a second successful telepathy roll and the expenditure of a further Magic Point per round, the psychic may engage in two-way communication with the subject. The subject may continue to resist, as for thought reading. Once this level of rapport is reached the telepath may attempt domination (see below) on the following round. If both parties are telepaths, Magic Point costs are halved, and the receiver may opt to share the costs; additionally, telepathy rolls are made at a bonus equal to one-tenth of the receiver's telepathy score.

Domination: Once the level of rapport necessary for communication (see above) has been reached, the psychic may attempt a third telepathy roll in order to



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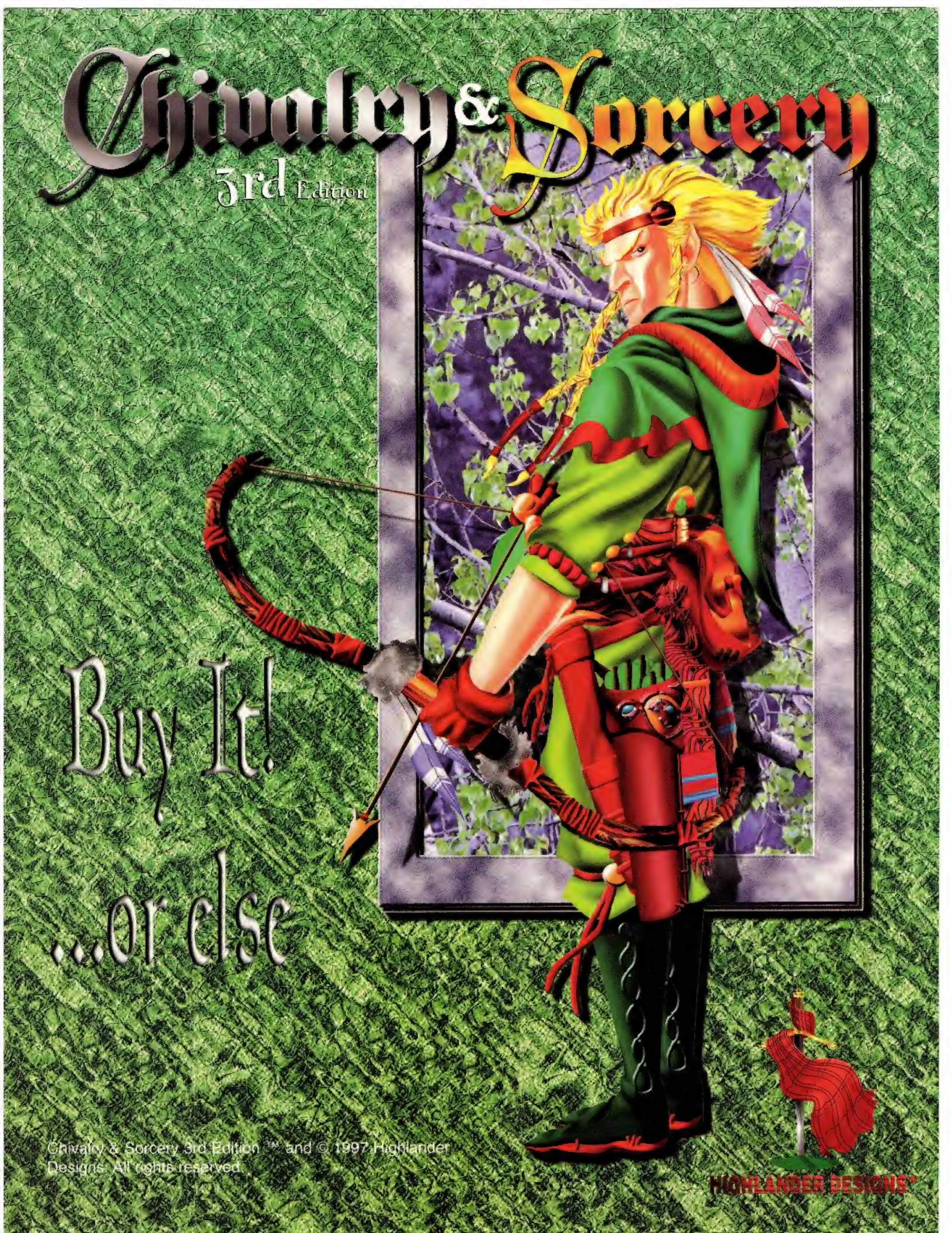

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force the subject into a POW vs POW conflict; this is in addition to any Magic Point conflict being conducted as the subject tries to free himself from the telepathic intrusion. If the psychic wins the POW vs POW conflict, the subject may be forced to perform one simple act which is neither reckless nor homicidal, and which takes no longer than two rounds. Once the act has been performed, the subject will have no memory of the telepathic contact, or of performing the act. In addition to the costs of thought reading and communication, this ability costs 1 Magic Point per 5 points of the subject's POW.

Attack: Telepathy may also be used aggressively. The procedure is exactly as for domination above, but instead of forcing the subject to perform an action, the telepath may inflict psychic damage. For every Magic Point expended by the telepath after the successful domination procedure, the subject will take one hit point of damage. This is identical to physical damage in all respects, except that lost hit points are regained at the same rate as expended Magic Points because of the psychic origins of the damage.

Mask: A telepath may mask his/her mind on a successful telepathy roll; a masked mind may only be detected or contacted by another psychic if he or she can successfully match POW with the masked mind; this includes detection by the use of clairvoyance.

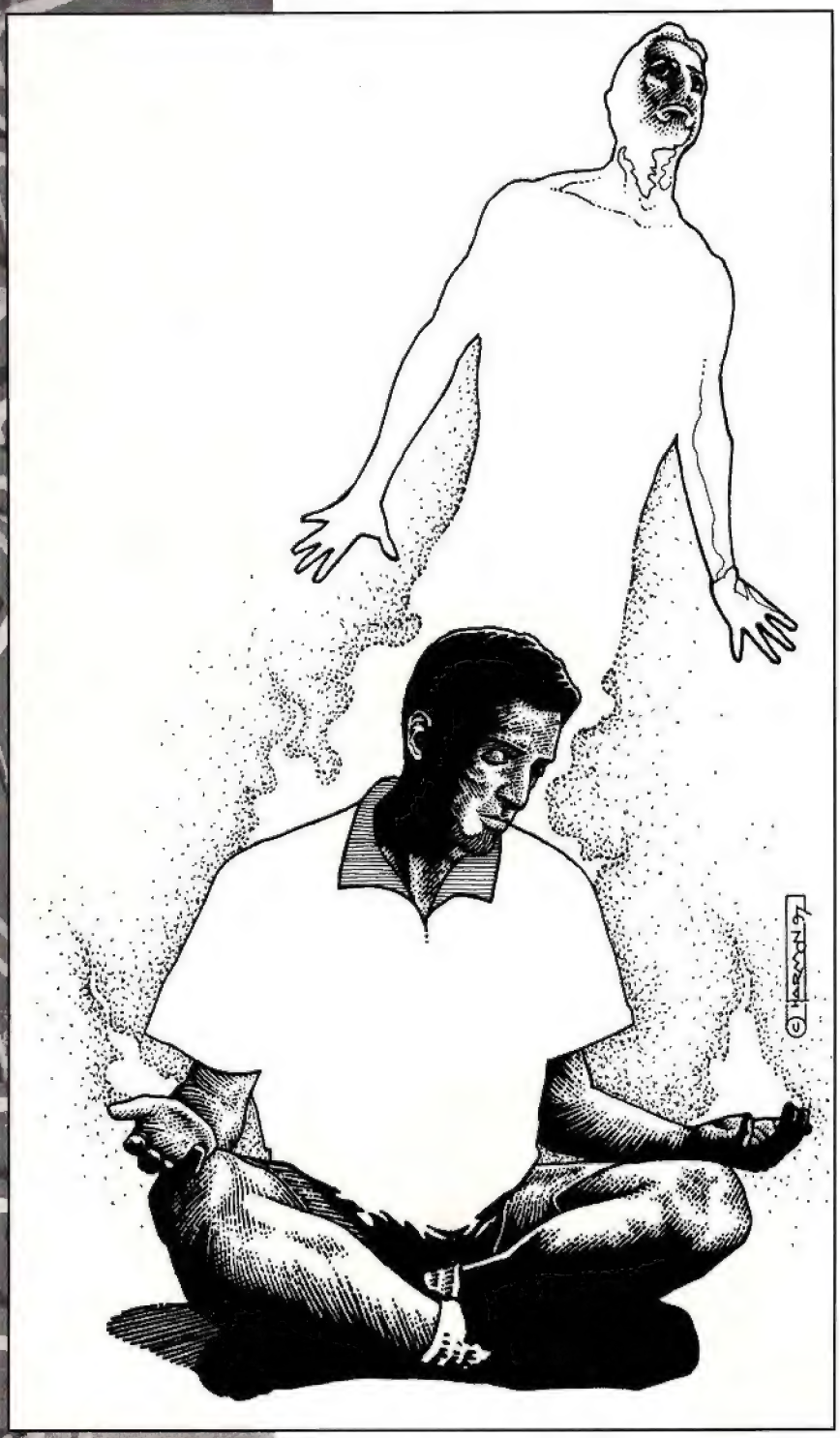
Mediumship

The talent of mediumship allows the user to hold spiritualist séances and communicate with the spirits of the dead. There is only one ability connected with the talent — séance, given below — but most professional mediums will have certain non-psychic skills in addition *(see "The Medium — a New Character Profession", at the end of this article)*. If this talent is used to gather information, the Keeper should be very careful over the quantity and quality of information gained — a dead informant can be just as vague, misleading or uncommunicative as a live one.

Séance: This ability enables the user to conduct a spiritualist séance, given the co-operation of all other participants. At the first séance a character conducts, he or she must make a mediumship roll twice — success on both rolls indicates that the character has gained a spirit guide, a friendly spirit who will thereafter act as an intermediary between the medium and the spirit world. No further activity is possible without the spirit guide, and once a spirit guide has been obtained, that spirit will work with the medium permanently — thereafter only one successful mediumship roll will be required for each séance in order to make contact with the spirit guide. Once contacted for a séance, the spirit guide will assist the medium in making contact with the desired spirit or spirits — a further mediumship roll is necessary for each such contact. The Keeper may modify this roll at will, according to how well the enquirers know the spirit they are seeking, whether or not the spirit is willing to be contacted, whether the spirit is known to haunt the area where the séance is taking place, and — of course — whether such contact is desirable for the progress of the adventure.

The 1920s was a period of great interest not only in the occult but in all areas of what today would be called the paranormal. Since many of Lovecraft's characters moved in mystic circles, the *Call of Cthulhu* keeper might find the following rules useful in dealing with psychic talents.

Once a spirit has been contacted, it is treated just like any other NPC informant, and the players should be encouraged to roleplay any questioning sessions. Telepathic characters might try to dominate the spirit psychically if they wish, but otherwise persuasion is the only tool the questioners have. Note that the medium may perform no action other than maintain-



ing the contact while a séance is in progress.

Clairvoyance

Sometimes referred to as 'second sight', this talent has to do with the remote viewing of distant places and the detection of psychic phenomena closer at hand. The abilities associated with this talent are as follows:

Clairvoyance: This ability permits the remote viewing of distant places. A successful clairvoyance roll is necessary each round, and each round a number of Magic Points must be expended, according to distance (use the table given for Telepathy, above). At the Keeper's option, it may be possible to view the spirit plane (see Spirit Travel below), or to view through time rather than space — in the latter case, substitute years for miles on the table, and note that it is only possible to view backwards through time. At the Keeper's option a scrying device such as a crystal ball may reduce the Magic Point cost.

Clairaudience: This ability works in exactly the same way as clairvoyance above, except that it permits remote listening instead of viewing.

Combined Clairvoyance and Clairaudience: This ability permits the user to watch and listen simultaneously, like the proverbial fly on the wall. For the simultaneous use of both talents, a 20% penalty is imposed on the clairvoyance roll and Magic Point cost is 3 per round.

Psychometry: This ability works in a similar way to Combined Clairvoyance and Clairaudience above, but uses an object as a 'focus'. The clairvoyant may monitor any events which have taken place in the object's immediate vicinity — seeing through its eyes and hearing through its ears, as it were. Although this viewing is through time rather than space, the use of the focus object negates any penalties to the clairvoyance roll, and each expenditure of Magic Points permits D4 rounds of uninterrupted monitoring.

Detect Psychic: The clairvoyant may detect an intruding mind at any time, on a successful clairvoyance roll. The Keeper should make these rolls secretly, in order to avoid arousing suspicions unnecessarily. This ability allows the clairvoyant to detect other clairvoyants scanning the area he is in, or telepaths trying to read his thoughts, or even the presence of incorporeal beings such as ghosts and spirit travellers. The range of this ability is 10 x POW feet; it has no Magic Point cost.

Block: On a successful clairvoyance roll, a clairvoyant may create an area of psychic interference with a radius of 10 x POW feet, centred on himself. The field costs 3 Magic Points for the first D6 rounds, and 1 Magic Point per round thereafter. No psychic scanning or communication ability will function within the area covered by the block, including telepathy, clairvoyance and spirit travel. The Keeper must decide whether any ghosts in the area will be repelled by the field.

Telekinesis

The talent of telekinesis permits the conversion of psychic energy into physical force and the exertion of this force upon physical matter. The abilities granted by telekinesis are as follows:

Move Object: A minor form of telekinesis, this ability can move any loose object (*i.e.* any object which is not nailed down or similarly secured) at a speed not exceeding 3 mph, in any direction including vertical. The ability requires a successful telekinesis roll and costs 1 Magic Point per 10 pounds of the object's weight — the roll and expenditure are repeated for each round of movement.

Hurl Object: Using this ability, any object weighing up to 10 pounds may be hurled on a successful telekinesis roll, at a cost of 1 Magic Point per pound of weight. The object has a 45% chance of hitting the target, and will inflict 1 point of damage per pound weight. If a sharp or pointed object such as a knife is

Mark and I then set out to develop a story arc that would not only address the "classic" archetypes (character, setting, plotting, and themes) but would engage Magic players in a way unusual in trading card games—

– Duelist, No. 17, June 1997

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hurled, attacks and damage are as for the appropriate weapon.

Telekinetic Blow: This ability uses pure telekinetic energy to deliver a physical blow. On a successful telekinesis roll, the blow hits the target automatically, and cannot be dodged or parried except by a successful telekinetic block (see below); however, the target must be in the psychic's line of sight. Base cost is 3 Magic Points, and base damage is as for a Fist attack; additional Magic Points may be invested in the attack, each additional Magic Point causing an additional point of damage. At the Keeper's option, any character hit by a telekinetic blow may be required to make a DEX x 5 roll to avoid being knocked down. This ability may be used to break, bend or shatter objects, each object making a resistance roll matching its breakage points against the Magic Points invested in the attack.

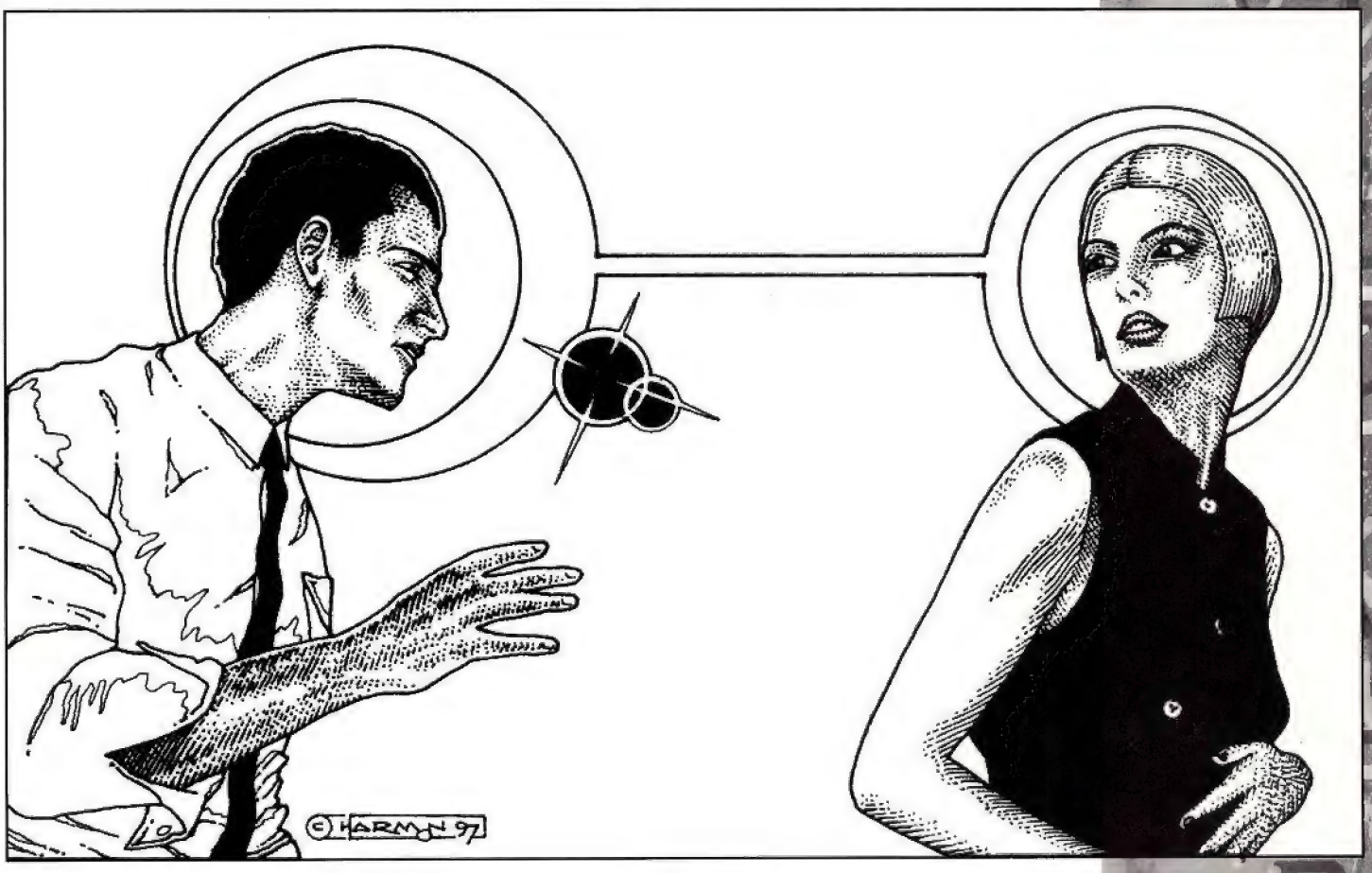
Levitation: This is a special application of telekinesis, and instead of a telekinesis roll it requires the user to match his or her POW against his or her SIZ. The Keeper may decide to impose further modifiers reflecting how heavily encumbered the character is when attempting levitation. A successful roll allows the character to rise up to 10 feet into the air, plus 1 foot for every point by which POW exceeds SIZ. The roll must be repeated each round, and each round of levitation requires the expenditure of Magic Points equal to one-third the character's SIZ. If the roll is failed or the character runs out of Magic Points, he or she immediately falls to the ground, sustaining damage as from a normal fall.

Block: This ability is used to block any one telekinetic action within POW x 10 feet of the user. The user must match POW with the psychic concerned, and if the block is successful the blocking character must expend a number of Magic Points equal to that invested in the action being blocked. If a character does not have sufficient Magic Points to block an action, it proceeds unhindered; the character attempting the block must make a successful POW x 5 roll or lose half his remaining Magic Points in the unsuccessful attempt.

If a critical failure is rolled while using telepathy, clairvoyance or mediumship, the psychic may unwittingly have made contact with a minor Mythos being: at the Keeper's discretion, a really spectacular failure might even involve Nyarlathotep himself.

Spirit Travel

This talent permits the user to travel by Astral Projection to the Spirit Plane on a successful spirit travel roll. The character's spirit leaves his body in a trancelike state, but remains attached to it by a 'silver cord' of ectoplasm. If the silver cord is severed, the



spirit traveller dies instantly; for every 3 POW of the spirit traveller, the silver cord has 1 point of armour and 2 hit points. If a spirit traveller's vacant body is disturbed in any way, the spirit is abruptly recalled, and the spirit raveller must make an immediate CON x 5 roll or die from shock; even if the roll is successful, the character is still stunned and helpless for (20-CON) rounds.

While on the Spirit Plane, the character appears physically the same (but naked), and may see into the material plane as well as the spirit plane. The character must expend 1 Magic Point for every 5 rounds of spirit travel, but it is not necessary to repeat the spirit travel roll once travel has begun. Movement rates are the same on the spirit plane as on the material plane, but physical obstructions, such as walls, present no obstacle.

Ghosts and other noncorporeal entities exist mainly on the spirit plane, and a spirit traveller may enter into quasi-physical combat with them. This is exactly the same as physical combat on the material plane, except that POW is substituted for STR and Magic Points for hit points. The spirit traveller must return to his body and re-enter the material plane before his Magic Points total reaches zero — if Magic Points are exhausted before this can happen, the spirit is abruptly recalled to the body just as if the body had been disturbed. If Magic Points fall to zero as a result of quasi-physical combat, the multiplier for the CON roll is equal to (5 — half negative Magic Points) — for example, a character with 2 Magic Points remaining takes a blow on quasi-physical combat which does 4 points of damage. This would reduce his Magic Points to -2, so his spirit is recalled to his body, and he must make a CON x 4 roll to avoid shock.

Quasi-physical combat is mainly unarmed, although a weapon specifically enchanted against ghosts, for example, will exist partly on the spirit plane, and can be used there. If you like theatrical effects, then the material portion of the weapon might move along with its spirit counterpart. Alternatively, the two might be separable — in this case, the spirit portion of the weapon will deteriorate after too long away from its physical 'body', losing one breakage point per 5 rounds. When breakage points are reduced to zero, the weapon ceases to exist on the spirit plane, and the physical form will also shatter.

At the Keeper's option, spirit travel might be one means of entering the Dreamlands.

Faith Healing

This talent permits the diagnosis and treatment of poisons, diseases and some injuries by psychic means; certain diseases may respond better to psychic healing than conventional medicine. The abilities conferred by this talent are as follows:

Diagnosis: This ability permits the user, on a successful faith healing roll, to diagnose any disease, poison or other ailment afflicting one patient, as if by the use of Diagnose Disease skill. The Keeper may decide to impose a penalty for attempts to diagnose ailments arising from magical or psychic attacks.

Healing: After a successful diagnosis, the healer may match his or her POW against the potency number of any one poison or disease with which the patient is afflicted. This assumes that diseases are given a potency rating like poisons, with, say, the common cold rated 1 and bubonic plague or yellow fever rated 19-20. In the cases of magical afflictions, the healer must match his or her POW against that of the character or being who inflicted the ailment.

If the roll is successful, the healer may expend Magic Points equal to one-third of the potency rating (or POW) of the affliction, and thereby destroy all traces of it, leaving the patient to recover lost hit points and attribute points in the normal way.

At the Keeper's option, this ability may also be used to heal wounds and injuries, with the healer matching his/her POW against the number of hit points lost and restoring D3 hit points for every Magic Point expended.

The Medium: A New Character Profession

Spiritualism was thriving in the 1920s, never having really lost the popularity it had gained in the 19th century; many mediums and spiritualists made a handsome living from holding séances to contact their clients' dead loved ones. Some may have been genuine psychics, but many were charlatans, living on the credulity of their clients.

A genuine medium must be psychic, and must have the talent of Mediumship described above. Other skills will include many also used by the charlatan.

A charlatan will have no psychic ability, and may well be highly skeptical about the supernatural. However, the charlatan's act will include a great deal of occult knowledge, either genuine or pretended. A high APP score will be a definite advantage, and common skills will include the following:

Occult
Psychology
Oratory
Prediction (see below)
Ventriloquism (see below)

Income

Many mediums had other, more mundane professions and did not depend on their talents as a sole source of income. Those who do, both genuine and charlatan, have a basic income of D4+2 x $1,000.

New Skills

Prediction (Knowledge skill, basic 00%): The successful use of this skill allows the character to make one prediction by means of astrology, palmistry, tarot or other cards, tea leaves, or some other means. Each method requires a separate skill. The Keeper should make all rolls for this skill secretly, leaking information to the players as he sees fit; the degree of success or failure is a good guide as to the amount and accuracy of any information gained.

Ventriloquism (Communication skill, basic 00%): Successful use of this skill permits the user to throw his or her voice, making it appear to come from somewhere other than the ventriloquist. A failed skill roll indicates that the deception has been penetrated — the ventriloquist's lips have been seen to move, for instance, or some other misfortune has occurred which has led to the deception being exposed.

Thaumaturgical Proliferation and Spells of Mass Destruction

Using Spell Availability in Your Campaign

By Chris Hepler and Jennifer Brandes

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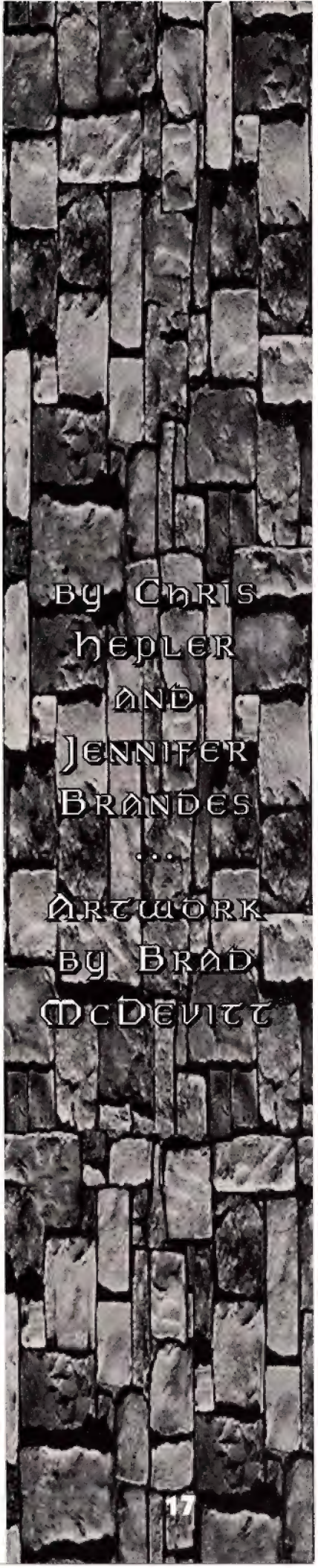
Artwork by Brad McDevitt



PLAYER: So, will the Great Callicantzaros teach me how to cast Fireball or not?

GM: He slams the door.

PLAYER: Huh? Wait a minute, everybody learns Fireball! I beat on the door.

GM: He sticks his head out and says, "Look, kid, you want me to teach you how to throw a ball of flame. That's the same thing as wanting to learn how to kill people. Horribly. And don't tell me you need it to defend yourself, 'cause there's plenty of spells that do that without destroying everything within a forty-foot area. And not only that, you also want to set it on fire, so it will catch, and you can burn down an entire forest, so people and animals you've never even heard of get roasted alive. Sorry, no. Don't know the spell." He slams the door.

PLAYER: What the hell? I yell that there are plenty of other people who know it, and they can have my money just as easily!

GM: There's no response.

When *AD&D* was first developed from its roots as a wargame, each member of the party was seen as a unit in a larger army. As the descriptions of character classes in the first edition *Players' Handbook* imply, the idea was that fighters were the standard troops, clerics the logistics and medics, thieves the reconnaissance, and magic-users the somewhat delicate artillery pieces. As a wargame, this was very cool, but it wasn't a complete world. Yet it set the precedent for how most role-playing games still handle spell acquisition: It's something you do between adventures, or part of the goodies to be handed out after the big climax.

Unfortunately, this view doesn't always hold up. Not every character lives in a war zone. And characters who aren't part of an army need somewhere and someone to learn spells from. Why, how, and when a spell is available can be a story hook, plot device, and/or game balance adjuster all in one.

If your game system hasn't stated what percentage and segments of the population use magic, and who can learn it, do yourself a favor as a GM and decide. Preferably before the campaign begins or the mages gain enough experience to learn new tricks. This gives a good base for figuring out how easy it is to learn spells in your world. In *Earthdawn*, for example, where magic is as common as electricity is in America, finding a new spell is much easier than in *Vampire*, where all Thaumaturgy rituals are directly guarded by the Tremere, the most power-hungry of all the clans.

Of course, with the hundreds of spells in most game systems, figuring out which ones you want the party to get is a time-consuming process. Will a spell make one PC overshadow the other characters? Or will it combine with them to be really fun for everyone? Worse yet, will it combine so well that the "stacked" characters become unstoppable, or so close to it that their only danger is from ungodly powerful opponents?

This isn't just about "spells of mass destruction." Quite often, letting a mage have a face-stomping combat spell works out fine. At least you know what the character will do with it. But in both the first *AD&D* and *Shadowrun* campaigns we were in, a mage in the party got an invisibility spell early on. And in both, the spell let the mage turn the entire party invisible. Not that this was easy, of course — it was just easy enough.

In *AD&D*, the spell's duration is twenty-four hours, unless you attack someone, and the rememorization time a few minutes per level. In hostile territories, the mage threw the spell over the party in the morning, letting them avoid most encounters. In *Shadowrun*, the mage was relatively helpless while sustaining the spell on four people at once, but in that game, the other party members could attack and not break the spell. By the time anyone figured out where the team was, they were halfway out the door.

Both sets of players coordinated their actions, trained as a team, and devised ways to travel with a minimum of fuss. In either case, this is a logical use of the spell for the characters' purposes — on its own, an invisibility spell can be fun and add drama to the game. But the problem was (and is, for many games) that though the spell was defensive, it still let the characters cut too many corners, making the game less fun. At that point, however, it was too late for the GM to change his mind about giving the mage the spell. Taking it away once the character learned it would rightly have most gamers up in arms about GM abuse of power. ("Boy, did that head shot hurt. You can't remember how to cast that any more. Sorry.") And just giving the bad guys bigger magic gets ridiculous, especially in a world where spells are supposedly rare.

The time to work out what spells the party can have is before they learn them. But how do you restrict them other than just saying "no?" How do you make spell acquisition fun, or part of the campaign-story? Look at what the spell actually does. How do the other denizens of your world feel about a group of adventuring ruffians knowing a spell like fireball? How are destructive magics controlled by law? What are the chances that the PCs can find an intelligent, friendly, cooperative teacher who knows just the spell they're

looking for?

Below are both rules-oriented and story-oriented ways to determine spell availability in your campaign world. Mix and match as you see fit.

The Rules Way

Regardless of game, there are some universal factors that determine how common a spell is, and whether or not someone would teach it to a stranger. To determine whether a character can find a teacher with the spell he wants, make two open-ended D10 rolls (if a 10 is rolled, roll again and add the result, allowing for the chance of extremely high numbers), looking for a base target number of 6. If the roll is 6 or higher, the PC succeeds. The first roll determines whether anyone nearby knows the spell.

However, no mage exists in a vacuum, and the specifics of the desired spell have a great deal to do with how common it is. Table 1 shows how modifiers can affect spell availability, giving sample increases to this base target number (penalties) and sample decreases (bonuses) for unusual factors.

Keep in mind that numbers higher than 10 are not impossible — just unlikely. Similarly, a roll of 1 always creates some critical circumstance (such as stirring up anti-magic hate groups by asking about it). This roll can be conducted about once a week in game time, or more frequently if magicians travel through the area often. If the player finds a strategy to counteract a penalty, drop the penalty and let her try again.

If the first roll succeeds, determine the potential teacher's willingness to deal with the character by making a second D10 roll with modifers from Table 2.

Play with the spells in your game system and see what Availability comes up. Write the number down next to the description of the spell for easy reference (modify it if there are extenuating circumstances not covered here). For class-and-level-based systems, these can be further modified in comparison to whatever level of spell the GM deems standard — for instance, Fourth Circle spells in *Earthdawn* could be the "no modification" standard, and First through Third Circle spells would be more common (-3 to -1), and Fifth and above would increase the penalties.

Table 1: Is the Spell Available?

Spell Situation	Modifier
Spell causes dramatic transformation that "scares the peasants" (grows bat wings or 10' taller)	+1
Spell has broad range of possibilities difficult to counter (illusion, shape changing, etc.)	+2
Spell causes property damage	+1
Spell immobilizes people	+1
Spell is lethal to human beings	+2
Spell controls people's minds (Charm, Control Thoughts)	+2
Spell has area effect	+1
Spell has BIG area of effect (Earthquake)	+2
Spell has stigma attached (undead raising)	+1
Spell has effects that spread (fire, diseases)	+1
Spell is banned by authorities	+2
Spell is rare, new, or awfully powerful	+1-2
Spell works on willing subjects only	-1
Spell heals/cures people	-1
No local government/restrictions or anarchy predominates	-1
Magic in general is part of local economy (Thera in *Earthdawn*)	-1
Spell is part of local economy	-4
Magic is part of local religion	-1
Spell is part of local life (crop growth spell in farmland)	-2
Big city	-1
Very magical population (drow elves in *AD&D*)	-2
Spell is used by government	-1
Spell is used by military	-2
Spell has "been around forever" or is "popular" or "trendy"	-1
PC magician has serious cash	-1
PC magician does serious advertising	-1
PC magician has something mages want more than cash	-2

The Story Way

If you're like us, the problem in running campaigns isn't rolling dice and saying yes or no — that takes a minute of thinking at most. The real trouble is how to turn learning spells into an adventure hook that's fun, memorable, and/or believable. For more specifics on where and how spells are restricted, take it from the point of view of a cop or government. As an example, look at the tried-and-true fireball spell common to *AD&D*, *Earthdawn*, *Shadowrun*, *Palladium*, and many other systems. Regardless of the exact mechanics, it usually boils down to the following:

- It's destructive. This is a spell that kills lots of people and does it well. A mage can throw one into a tavern, McHugh's, bazaar, or rock concert and kill twenty people in under a second. It also destroys buildings, records, and property. Think about how much would burn if your house caught fire. Expand that to a medieval-type city in a fantasy world — all the houses packed together and made out of wood, the very circumstances that led to the Great Fire of London. Even if people survive the initial blast, where do they go after? What does the government do with the newly homeless? How do friends, families, and therapists deal with all the shell-shocked survivors?
- Countermeasures which actually stop the spell while it is being cast are minimal. You can try to put out the flames afterward, but unless someone watches the caster, can figure out what they're doing, and is willing and able to stop them, a "mad sniper" scenario could kill hundreds.
- Numbers are not much of an advantage against a mage with the spell. Even if a watch patrol or squad car of cops pulls up, one good blast and they're dead. So are the ambulances or healers who come to the scene. Without countermagic or overwhelming mundane force, the cops and governments are relatively helpless against a single powerful magician.
- It's portable and concealable. Even if the government checks everyone coming into their city at a gate or an airport, how can they tell who knows the spell? Anyone can wear more standard clothes than robes, and in *Shadowrun*, *Earthdawn* and *Vampire*, where it isn't necessary to tote around a spell book, there's no way to tell short of mind reading. Some game systems require spell components, but how do you keep people from getting sulfur and bat guano? Again, it comes down to either countermagic or a very "proactive" police state… um, police force.
- Even if you do catch the mage, how do you prevent this from happening again? How do you keep a magical prisoner who could (for all you know) throw

another spell and entrance your guards? If you kill the mage, you're still faced with all their possible teachers, students and fellow cultists who know the same spell.

Fireball, therefore, is about as dangerous as a rocket launcher loaded with incendiary shells, and should be treated as such. Never mind such frightening heavies like a death spell or Earth and Air.

Using Spells in Play

Having the capability to kill masses of people with a thought puts a damper on the "we're alone against the world" feeling which creates suspense in most novels and games. An evil villain surrounded by platoons of guards isn't that intimidating if you can blow down his entire house or de-cloak in his bedroom at night with ten of your buddies. This leads the GM to either restrict himself exclusively to magical bad guys, or simply takes the fun out of the game by making everything too easy for the players. Not to mention that non-spell-caster characters should also have a chance to shine.

The GM can find it difficult to "herd" players in the right direction by providing an onrushing crowd of maddened people, armed guards, or superior opponents if the players are ready, willing, and able to commit mass murder at every turn. How many times in a detective novel is the hero slapped around and told to stay off the case? And how possible is it for people to slap around your magical PCs? Not likely, unless the enemy is more magical yet.

Again, of course, the time to restrict spells is before the PCs get them. When deciding what to let the party have, a GM should figure out what scenarios the characters are likely to run into, and what spells would let the characters get around them, even in ways other than killing people. Such spells can be called "force multipliers."

The two most dramatic examples we've see are, once again, from *Shadowrun* and *AD&D*. Chris's *AD&D* character sold out a thieves' guild when he was second level, earning the enmity of Ether, a complete bad-ass of an assassin. Both GM and players knew that if this guy took off his hood, you'd see "Evil Recurring Villain You'll Love to Hate" stamped on his forehead. After the first encounter, the group took to back roads, using the invisibility trick mentioned above, and then started hunting him, figuring that if we waited for him to strike we'd have no chance. We couldn't take him in a stand-up fight; we averaged fourth level and high twenties of hit points apiece, with our only magic being a little +1 and +2 stuff here and there.

So instead we hit him with our dinky second-level spell, web. Goodbye. The problem here is that whether you make the saving roll or not, you still have to spend a few rounds sawing your way out of the mess. In other words, if someone hits you with this spell, unless you've got specific countermagic or light yourself on fire, there's nothing you can do.

We beat the crap out of Ether. We pounded and pounded and zapped his berserker buddies and stabbed him while he was valiantly fighting his way out of that web, and ended up with four of six party members on the ground at the end. But we got him. The GM told us afterward that Ether had about 126 hit points. His six buddies weren't too shabby, either. And we missed pretty often in that fight. (If you haven't played *AD&D*, think of 126 hp as on a par with big dragons, AV-4 aerodynes, and Rhode Island.)

In a game system that kills people even faster, you can see a spell's "force multiplier" work in under three seconds. At the end of a certain *Shadowrun* adventure, we were facing some monster-bad ork mercenaries who were armed and armored to hell, spilling out of a helicopter to surprise our team. While others readied their guns for the big firefight, Chris asked the GM to describe what they had on them. Lots of grenades? he

asked hopefully. Bandoleers of them, the GM said. So he threw a Magic Fingers spell: basic telekinesis at very long range. So much for the pins on the grenades. Magic Fingers is, again, a simple spell with little effort involved compared to "combat spells."

The weak link in the scenario that this spell exploited? The bottle-neck of destructive power and the open-ended description of the spell. Of course, since each of the orks were carrying grenades, the GM ruled that they — and the helicopter they were in — were turned into a fireball bigger than one Chris' character could ever cast.

Recognize how small details like this can stop your climactic battle before it ever gets past foreplay. Look for key omissions in spell descriptions, like the lack of upper limits on how high you can Levitate someone in *Earthdawn*. In that game, if you fall farther than thirty feet, it's probably a slow march with black armbands for you. Look for something that can shut a bad guy's combat effectiveness down entirely without a chance to resist (GMs can fudge most of the time as long as the opponent gets a resistance roll). Bone Dance in *Earthdawn* is a first-Circle spell that, if cast successfully, sends the target into convulsions (and out of action) for at least four combat rounds. And, like web, watch out for something where even a successful resistance means the target is still down and out. Spells like this that last for more than two or three rounds might as well just kill the victim outright.

As far as defensive spells are concerned, watch out for things that negate attacks entirely (stoneskin, fire shield), or don't have any obvious way to get around their effects (wall of iron). Polymorphing or shape-changing is practically invisibility itself: who will notice a fly in their corporate skyraker, or a pigeon on the window? And the old "I fly above their head and then turn into a rhino" number can be tough to deal with, if only for calculating damage to both parties.

In a lot of these cases a little thought beforehand can save you a headache after. If the spell omits a critical bit of info in its description, add it in before anyone ever uses it. If it's the spell itself that's the problem, you may want to tone down the effects, disallow it entirely, or just put in a few restrictions (see Roleplaying the Learning, below).

Finding the Teacher

This is an often-overlooked point where the GM can throw in plot complications and even some characterization without actually introducing the teacher mage. The mage not being home is a standard delaying tactic — but where is he? The mage could be homeless, moving from street to street eating out of garbage cans because she's cheap, poor, or even looking for spell components. In seriously high fantasy, maybe the teacher's house only appears in this world every now and then, and the characters have to find where it'll be next. Maybe the mage is on the run from an oppressive regime, a jilted lover, or big guys with tattoos. Maybe she's using that invisibility spell to her best advantage, and she checks out the characters when they start asking about her.

GMs should flesh out the teachers before the characters ask about them. How many mages are there in this town, and do they work together or on their own? What do the magicians do with their magic in everyday life? Even magicians who are somewhat solitary need to eat; do they use their magic for their job, or are their more like modern Wiccans, holding down mun-

dane jobs and practicing only in their free time? What sort of friends does the mage have? (The best way to avoid superstitious or governmental distrust for the mage is to have chums in the community who will put in a good word for her during witch-burning times.)

On a larger scale, what is the local opinion of magic? In most games, even though player characters can be chock full of magic, spell-casters are a minority of the general population, meaning as a group they will be treated specially. Depending on the local religion and ethics, the public response can be to hate and fear mages, revere them as sacred (either allowing them great freedom or keeping them "protected" at all times) or want to use them to their own ends (individuals blackmailing or coercing them or the government controlling them as a "public resource").

In most cases, due to the reasons given above, people will fear mages both for what they know they can do, and what they don't understand. If the characters are new to town and they begin asking about the local mages, they could bear the brunt of public response to some messy fireballing incident a few weeks ago. Think about how vicious witch hunts and racial war are our world, and we don't have real magic. Europeans killed cats because they were associated with witches. What superstitions would arise from the real powers that mages have in your game?

In *Shadowrun*, a scandal involving the Eight Immortals' rock band mind-controlling their audience has forever made people leery of magical coercion. A gamemaster could take this one step farther and say that urban legends have sprung up about mages using Control Emotions spells to snare the lover of their dreams. The game consequence? The potential romance with an NPC love interest now has a hurdle to get over, as her (or his) family thinks it's just the mage PC and his "evil charms." Or people clam up when the characters mention the word "mage," and word quickly spreads not to talk to them or they'll "give you the evil eye." How can they find a teacher when just talking about magic has the city guard posted in front of their house, just waiting for them to make a wrong move?

If magic is genetic, mages might be selected at birth and either killed, moved to special concentration camps, or entered into government training programs. Will the characters try to get to one of these mages, or look for the few whose families saved them, who are rumored to live in the ruins a few miles away where they're training to strike back against the regime? In a place like this, magic can be synonymous with "enemy of the state."

Even in places where magic is a part of the local environment and mages are common, individuals can still vary greatly in their personality and behavior. This all must be taken into account when looking for a teacher. Is he out carousing? ("Yeah, the Great Callicantzaros isn't in again, and when you find his mangy half-drunk behind, you can tell him that unless he gets his butt back here, Mrs. Great Callicantzaros is going to sweep that pentagram off the floor in the basement!") Down in the fields figuring out why the crops aren't growing? Out with the king, lightning-bolting peasants for his entertainment? Behind so much paper in the Great Library no one is sure if he's alive — they just leave food by the door and it disappears by morning? On a holy crusade into the netherworlds? Constructing her unstoppable engine of destruction? ("Um... never mind that thing in the basement. It's... complicated. [BOOOM!] What did you want again?")

Any first impression the character has of the teacher can come back into the plot later, either while he's still trying to convince the teacher he's worthy of teaching, or afterwards when he's in debt to her. Maybe Mrs. Callicantzaros does clean up that pentagram and lets something loose to ravage the countryside. Or the crops aren't growing because someone's sabotaging them. Or the peasants revolt because of how the king treats them and the PC gets targeted as a friend of that awful magician. Or the teacher overthrows the government with her unstoppable engine of destruction, the final part funded by the PC's purchase of the spell. What does the group do about these things?

What protagonists do best — get sucked into another adventure.

Maybe this teacher isn't a mage at all, but can still get the PC the spell. It just takes some, uh... "judicious omission of details" and some money. ("Here, have the scroll. No guarantees. Goodbye.") Never mind the irate, very powerful mages trying to find the thief (or whoever bought the stolen goods) and bring them to justice. Or a PC mage/thief character can combine her specialties.

The last variable to consider is the source of information. If the teacher has enemies, they may use the

Table 2: Is the Teacher Willing to Instruct the Spell?

Condition	Modifier
Teacher has racial bias to student	+1-3
Student has lousy Charisma	+1
Student has superior Charisma	-1
Student has superhuman Charisma	-2
Student is hunted by enemies (penalty waived at cost of alerting enemies)	+1-3
Student has bad reputation	+1
Spell banned by authorities	+2
Spell is teacher's means of wealth (they fear competition)	+2
Teaching spells is teacher's means of wealth	-2
Spell can be easily used on teacher	+1
Spell is lethal to human beings	+2
Spell is open-ended in its use (as per Availability table)	+1
Spell cures/heals	-1
Teacher gets prestige for teaching spell to student (ideology, famous student, teacher invented spell)	-1-3
Mild cultural difference (New York to Atlanta)	+1
Moderate cultural difference (New York to Paris)	+2
Severe cultural difference (New York to Tokyo)	+3
Extreme cultural difference (New York to hive intelligence)	+4
Language barrier	+1-3
Student has ready cash	-1
Student has more than double fee	-2
Student has mountains of cash	-3
Student has unusual magic to trade	-1 to -4
Teacher thinks mages should "stick together"	-1
Teacher is lonely for other mages	-1
Teacher considers it a duty to teach the spell	-2

Why, how, and when a spell is available can be a story hook, plot device, and game balance adjuster all in one.

PCs as a way into the magician's house, or demand "one small favor" from them in return for the address. And once the mage finds out who sent them, the characters will have to talk for a while to get out of their predicament. They may be so busy they completely forget about getting their spell.

Motivations

You know what the player character wants — the spell. So what does the teacher need, want, or just feel like that day? This mage — whatever trials of life she has suffered through — is in a position of power relative to the PC. And more likely than not, she won't be easily threatened or bribed with any spells in the PC's collection. Meaning she can ask for whatever payment she wants…

The number one motivation for everyone is survival. This breaks down to security, food, and usually money to accomplish the former. If the mage is threatened by the locals, she may ask the PC to help — scaring, persuading, or coercing people into leaving the mage alone… or just providing an alternate target. Perhaps the mage is threatened by some less-easily-impressed entity such as organized crime, dragons or otherworldly creatures, and needs some difficult-to-find item to appease them. What if the mage is dying of disease, curses, or old age, and needs the character to find a cure? What if their primary motivation is not survival, but they would die for their true love, god, or family?

Number two on the list is prestige and long-range goals. How the magician earns prestige instantly fleshes out another part of the world. If the magician wants to impress someone, it creates another character who could affect the lives of the PCs. The teacher may have reached the point where the other mages know all her strengths and weaknesses — but having four skilled students win a magical tournament in her name (and she only has three students so far) would raise her status permanently.

Or perhaps this magician's research funding is going to be cut, and he (with a little help from our heroes) needs to stage something that will convince his superiors of its dire necessity. If magic is genetic, perhaps the mage is hearing that biological clock ticking away, and wants to have children to pass on her gifts. The potential lover could be anyone from the student to a lost girlfriend in another land who must be rescued to one of the other player characters the mage thinks is cute.

This is an easy place to bring in the rest of the group. Although the party's mage may be the only one directly dealing with the teacher, the teacher may pick up on the usefulness of the whole group. The PCs in most roleplaying games form a more-or-less cohesive team in combat. That's useful, especially for private citizens such as the teacher.

If the mage is a public figure who wants something illegal done, he may not publicly sanction their actions, but can reward them through a middleman. And, of course, if the party is composed of people the mage has no emotional connection to; they can be set up, framed, or sent on a suicide mission, leading to still more complications as they figure out why, and look for revenge.

Roleplaying the Learning

What fun would it be if the spell worked the first time and every time? It'll probably work out the way

the player expects during the rest of the campaign, so here's your chance to show how weird magic is when it's not under control.

All the possible quirks come out when one mage tries to teach another how to tap into power. Even if the cosmology of the world is fairly ironed out in the rulebooks, the NPC magician sure doesn't know all that stuff, but rather has her own superstitions and traditions hammered into her by her teacher. Even if she is completely enlightened, she can still have trouble explaining it in a way the PC understands. ("Spells are like snowflakes. They never fall in an inappropriate place.") This works especially well for spells where the duration or effects are random, determined by dice rolls. ("I find that Metal Wings keeps you aloft longest when you are facing north to breathe the air that sweeps down from the mountains, which you must hold in your lungs for as long as possible. It also helps if you haven't had sex since the last full moon... hey, wipe that look off your face!") Any idiosyncrasies the teacher has can be passed on to the student, because he actually believes this is the way it works. This gives a GM a great opportunity to give a powerful spell to a PC while adding some extra baggage and restrictions to keep it under control.

If magic is strongly associated with an ethnic group, fashion trends can easily spring up. If the best magicians in a human kingdom are elves recruited from outside, the mages bring in their habits and folk wisdom along with real magical power. This can affect just the PC ("Plant Talk only works if you promise never to harm a tree."), or the whole kingdom (the king's court starts eating spinach and cauliflower, the elves' staple... leading the merchant classes to imitate it... leading to the merchants sending out explorers, namely your group, to find more land where they can grow these crops, etc.).

Where the teacher takes the PC to practice is also a consideration. Just where do you field-test creeping doom, Ward Against Lupines, animate dead, Hellblast, wall of stone, or a spell that lets you blot the sun from the sky? In a big city, testing ranges could be bought and paid for by a college of magicians, but they're only open to those in favor with the college. And if the PC isn't careful enough and the testing range is destroyed, the college is going to need prime real estate — preferably lots of open space and some very durable borders. How do the locals feel about living next door to this testing range? And what can the player characters do to convince them it's okay?

The threat of misfired magic is never greater than when mages are experimenting, and the learning process is constant experimentation. Haste could give the character the runs, age him five years, or kill him outright. Increase Body +4 can cause all sorts of medical problems if some organs (heart) are souped-up and others aren't (lungs). Sound-based illusions could cause a constant "echo" behind the caster for days or bad music to drive an illusionist mad.

Of course, when the character is going for really hideous spells, how does he learn or practice them at all? Who will trust someone else with wish? Part of the reason wish is usually a rare magic is because it on the power level of an atomic bomb, but more versatile. Crafty mages will want a way to undo the spell if the students prove untrustworthy. They can teach them the wish formula (or any other deadly spell) with a few minor errors in the pattern so that when the PC uses it under certain conditions (say, anything that harms other people), it just shuts down. Better yet, a savvy magician can install "backdoors" like computer programmers use. Thus armed, they can disable a mage's spell capability or be personally immune to its effects. If the teacher is truly mercenary, or someone gets them under duress, the "password" could get out, leaving a third party with a way to negate the magic of everyone this mage ever taught, including the PC. If this is the ultimate villain of a campaign, it can be very dramatic when the party readies its worst spells only to see the villain sit calmly through the attack.

The teacher herself may want to use the characters for some other purposes... and won't necessarily tell the characters first. If the teacher says that they have to enter a trance to learn the magic, what character would doubt them? Of course, while they're in that trance, the mage can make some hypnotic suggestions which further her own agenda. Programming a hapless PC mage to take out a pistol and shoot the state senator at her next rally leaves relatively little trace, particularly if the PC isn't supposed to survive. Less malicious mages may try to implant suggestions to reform the mage "for his own good," from quitting smoking to being a good Catholic to sending money home to the magician in grateful thanks every month. ("I loved it... It was better than Earth Darts... I'm going to cast it again and again...") Real do-gooder mages may try to psychologically repair the repressed memories of their students or help them through therapy before trusting them with magic.

Practical considerations can also lead the teacher to rip off her students, either intentionally or accidentally. If you need diamond dust to cast stoneskin, a mage isn't likely to give up his supply just so a student can keep trying "one more time" to get it right. So maybe this teacher has never used the spell, but only copied it down by rote from his instructor... who copied it from hers... who copied it from his... who wasn't trusted at all by his, but was assured it would work if the diamond dust were actually present... but none of them know. Con men can take advantage of this rarity in an eyeblink. "Of course I got stoneskin... I just don't have the stuff to throw it with... you want the spell formula or not? Six thousand, up front." The PC is left with garbage — and a motivation to get back the stolen money, leading them into another adventure plot or sub-plot that can come back when they find the con man on vacation in some exotic spot.

Conclusion

Spell availability need not be a headache. In a well-run game, a simple request to learn fireball can start four or five plots rolling at once, running the party out of two or three countries and keeping them narrowly dodging assassins for so long they forget to even ask about the spell. Magic is a fun and interesting part of most games, something which keeps them different from the real world and more fun to play in. It can also take away all the fun by giving the players so many shortcuts that they don't bother to think. The trick is to keep the balance, allowing the players to look for and get as much magic as they really want, while making sure that you control the situations they use it in. By controlling how the player characters learn their spells, you can keep a better handle on when and how they'll use them, while also giving them a personal and pressing stake in the plots that you — and their teachers — drag them into.

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Close Encounters of the 5th Kind: a MiB MEN IN BLACK Adventure

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by Nikola Vrtis

Artwork by Cris Dornaus

Map by KC Lancaster

In 1972, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, a civilian consultant who had worked on a government UFO investigation project, invented a system of classifying UFO reports. Close encounters of the *fifth* kind are those that involve direct communication with aliens, such as the one characters in this adventure will try to make.

Procedure

This adventure has been designed as a triggered scenario; thus it is not presented in the usual, straightforward style. It is therefore imperative that you read the whole scenario at least once to familiarize yourself with the setup before the first game session.

Included here, simultaneously, are two scenarios: One is from the point of view of the Men in Black agents. The other is from a group of normal humans interested in extraterrestrial life. Though both groups have the same goal — meeting the new alien — they each want to accomplish it for different reasons. (The third possibility, the point of view of the aliens, we'll leave up to you.) Your players can belong solely to one group or the other, or come from a mix of the two, providing an opportunity for some amusing interparty conflict.

To distinguish the two scenarios, we call the normal humans "Club Members" as opposed to Men in Black agents. The scenario for the club members is suitable for any alien investigation group not associated with the MiB, whether they call themselves a club or not.

The adventure assumes that the characters already know each other and are willing to work together. If your players' characters haven't met, you may wish to go through a short scenario before getting into this one; it could be a simple as a briefing for the Men in Black agents that introduces everyone, or a meeting that happens earlier in the week for other groups.

Stats are included for both Men in Black agents and members of the Friends of Aliens Club. There are cast members provided for your use as appropriate; don't feel that your players must take these stats if they've decided to play one of those groups.

If your players choose to be Men in Black agents, make certain that at least one member of the group has a neuralyzer, a spectral analyzer, and a cellular phone. If one of them doesn't already have these, then give the equipment with the assignment.

A time limit is imposed on the players. If they take too long to decide what to do, they miss opportunities to gain more information. Keeping track of the game time is important, yet be aware that searching would take longer than the time it takes to say, "We're looking." Be generous in the amount of time you allow for each of the characters' activities.

"Close encounters…" takes place at a sci-fi/gaming convention called StarCon. It's located in a small city not more than a few hours from the characters' last location. Two hundred to three hundred people will be attending. The scenario begins on a cold, cloudy day in March or November.

Scene 1: First Contact

Use the prologue appropriate for your player group.

For Men in Black Agents

MiB headquarters picked up an unauthorized ham radio transmission from an unknown sources at approximately 9:00 PM Friday evening. Saturday morning, Zed contacts the agents. He tells them that an unknown entity sent a message to a group who investigate the alien encounters that make it to the press, called the Friends of Aliens Club. The message indicated that the sender would meet the club at a gaming convention, StarCon, going on today. The agents are assigned stop it and apprehend whoever set up the meeting. Zed tells them, "We need to find out what's going on here. Bring her in alive for questioning. Do the whole thing as quietly as possible; we don't want to alert her colleagues."

The only things Zed knows from the trans-

mission is that the alien sounds female and that she sang her comments; unfortunately, that isn't enough for the database to provide any suggestions as to the species. Zed also tells the agents that the FAC members are harmless unless they actually make contact with the alien, and thus should be ignored. No need to buy trouble. Of course, if the meeting *does* take place, the FAC members will need to be neuralyzed.

Alien Dossier: Fahey

Species: Untxa
Reflexes 3D
acrobatics 4D+1, hth combat 4D+2, piloting: spaceships 3D+1
Strength 2D
Knowledge 3D+2
Confidence 3D
willpower 3D+1

Gender: Female
Coordination 2D
Endurance 4D
running 5D
Perception 3D+1
artist: painting 3D+2, English 4D
Charisma 3D
charm 4D+2, disguise 3D+2

Character Points: 7
Fate Points: 2
Body Points: 41
Quote: "Reality is so much more than this."

Fahey has preregistered for the convention as Rica Gruidae. She has on an extra-large blue sweatshirt, a long plaid knit scarf (which partially hides a short necklace made of silver disks), and a dark green broomstick skirt. She carriers a roomy satchel. She wears a brown, very curly wig over her head except when she enters the Bazaar at 12:00 PM and at 4:00. Then she takes the wig off (and puts it in her bag), showing off her nine-inch long rabbit-like ears. Fahey puts the wig back on before she attends her seminar.

Fahey's face is pointed, like a rabbit's, but her big, round eyes are set in front of her face (instead of to the sides). Her entire head and ears are covered in short, light brown fur. Her eyes are deep brown. Fahey is almost five foot five, including ears. With her wig on, she looks like a kid wearing an awesome mask.

Her first game is in Slot B (10:00 AM), Techno Trains. When at the game, she sits with her back to the rest of the gaming area. At 2:00 PM, she attends the seminar "Are We Alone?" At the seminar, she sits near the front, in a position farthest from the door. Thus, at a glance, she looks like everyone else. When she's not in the game or the seminar, she will wander around the Bazaar.

Fahey knows about the MiB agency and wants to blow their cover. Her people think Humans are ready for a spiritual Awakening — and the Men in Black are preventing this from happening. Fahey is one of the vanguard. (Other members of her race, the Untxa, are setting up meetings with other possible contacts around the world.) She hopes she can establish an ally with FAC. If the Men in Black capture her, she will go with the characters quietly, refusing to answer any questions. Once she is taken to headquarters, she will reveal little about her race, claiming that she is one of a handful of refugees who crashed a few weeks ago. She had been looking for help; she didn't realize she was doing anything wrong.

She wears a ELN 1148, a device that resembles a necklace made of large disks and that gives off a false spectral reading (that of a human; see Lesson 3 for a more complete description of this device). Fahey will not reveal its existence. If the ELN is destroyed, it will cause a bright flash, much like a neuralyzer, blinding for five rounds anyone who sees the glare, which would allow Fahey to escape if the MiB agents aren't wearing their sunglasses.

Fahey and other members of her group have been watching the club members for several months; thus she knows who she is looking for. Fahey will not contact the club members before the costume contest; she wants to check them out before she commits to the encounter. If Fahey thinks the Men in Black are too close to discovering who she is, she will abandon the attempt to contact the club members. She will leave by a door not near the agents.

Fahey cannot be surprised. She sings instead of speaking.

Zed gives the player characters directions to the convention before he signs off. If they hurry, the agents will arrive at the convention at 8:00 AM. By the time they get there, the parking lot will contain a lot of cars; the agents need to park near the back.

If the player characters ask, Zed can provide a description of Todd, the FAC president. Zed can also provide them with a transcript of the speech:

Female voice: "This is what you've been waiting for, isn't it? Contact with extraterrestrial life forms? It's what I've been waiting for too. It is unsafe for me to speak more plainly now. I will contact you again at StarCon this weekend. Beware of black clothes."

For Club Members

Read or paraphrase the following:

It's after midnight on Friday, and you are all gathered for your weekly ham radio session. Suddenly, the little unit crackles, interrupting the broadcast you were enjoying. After a moment of silence, you hear a beautiful, musical voice: "This is what you've been waiting for, isn't it?" The words seem sung. "Contact with extraterrestrial life forms?" the voice continues. "It's what I've been waiting for too. It is unsafe for me to speak more plainly now. I will meet you at StarCon this weekend." The next part is mostly lost in static, but you think she said, "Wear black." Then the radio goes dead a few seconds before returning to the original broadcast.

Allow the players to choose whether they had already decided to attend StarCon or not.

Scene 2: StarCon

Note that many of these time-dependent events are also place-dependent. The characters may miss an important piece of information because they weren't in the right place. If the characters don't seem to be asking the right questions (and the players are getting frustrated), you may want to include the information they need in a conversation that they happen to overhear. Until the costume contest at 4:00 PM, the characters should always just miss the alien, Fahey, unless they come up with an exceptional plan to corner her.

To keep the players interested and involved, be generous with your descriptions of what's happening around them. Have attendees stop the characters to chat (for these encounters, you may wish to come up with some small talk before the game session); perhaps a cast member (NPC) recognizes (or thinks he or she recognizes) one of the characters. Relay snatches of conversations the characters overhear. Drop a hint or two by having various gamers remark on a particularly well-executed costume (perhaps that of the alien they seek). Dredge up all those old memories of attending conventions and insert as many details as you can. (If you've never been to a large convention, think a giant Halloween party crossed with shopping malls at Christmas. It comes close.)

Average Gamers

Men and women from preteen to thirty-something. Everyone wears comfortable clothes, mostly blue jeans and sweatshirts or flannels and T-shirts. Everyone carries some sort of bag or folder to hold their gaming stuff.

Name: Varies

Species: Human
Reflexes 1D
Coordination 2D
Strength 1D
Endurance 2D
Knowledge 2D+2
Perception 3D
Confidence 2D+1
Charisma 2D
Character Points: 1
Fate Points: 0
Body Points: 25

Description: These stats are good for cast members who would not otherwise have stats. Skills for specific cast members will vary; see the various descriptions below.

Dealers

The dealers will try not to be too intrusive as people browse their displays, and they will readily answer any questions when asked. If the characters talk with any of the dealers before noon about Fahey, they reply that they don't remember anyone fitting that description. If the players ask a dealer who has spoken with Fahey to point her out, they will not be able to spot her in the crowd.

The following is a sample list of dealers:

Jessi Lutz and Scott Raimund staff the Computer Haus table. Jessi wears jeans a purple blouse; Scott has on blue jeans, a white dress shirt, and a tie. Jessi knows the latest Web sites to hit, and Scott has tips for all the hottest games. Fahey wandered by the booth at little before 12:15. Jessi was swapping surfing stories with a customer, but Scott saw Fahey and complimented her on her costume. She merely waved back.

Joe Aznar is working for End of the Universe (a comic and used book store). Joe wears an End of the Universe T-shirt and dress pants. Fahey visited this table at about 12:15 and chatted with Joe.

Amie Patrinski is at the table for Deen's Trains and Games. Amie has on a granny dress in a tiny-flowered print. Fahey spoke with her after relinquishing Joe to another person. If the players visited the booth earlier in the day, Amie will greet them warmly when they return.

Be sure to add other dealers. Maybe the convention staff were able to convince some of the larger roleplaying and computer game companies to visit. Use the "Average Gamer" stats for all the dealers with these skills: all have business 3D and charm 4D; Scott and Jessi have computer ops 4D and scholar: computer programs 4D; Joe has scholar: comic books 4D; Amie has scholar: roleplaying games 4D

Artists

There are four local artists at the Art Exhibit. One of them, Rose Wrtishof, is selling small clay sculptures in a variety of themes. Some of these were designed for use as goblets or bowls. The other artists have drawings, but each artist focuses on a different theme: Jeremy Lauzon does science fiction, Mike Pater does fantasy, and Dotty Baird does horror. Mike also sketches caricatures, for a nominal fee (artist: drawing 6D). They laugh and joke with each other and with people who stop by their areas. They will answer any questions about their work. Rose is from out of town but knows the other three artists. None of them remember seeing anyone by Fahey's description. (Fahey did not visit this area.) Use the "Average Gamer" stats with business 4D; Jeremy, Mike, and Dotty have artist: drawing 6D; Rose has artist: sculpture 6D.

"And your name is...?"
"Smith. John Smith."

Security Guards

One of the two security guards will first speak with a person about unacceptable behavior. If it doesn't stop, a guard will escort the person out. If the person returns, the guard will accost the person and tell him or her that the police will be called. The guards will call the police if they see a weapon pulled. A new set of security guards relieves the day shift at 6:00 PM.

Species: Human
Reflexes 2D+1
hand-to-hand combat 2D+2
Coordination 2D+2
marksmanship 3D
Strength 2D
Endurance 2D
running 2D+2
Knowledge 1D

Alien Dossier: T'tame Oj

Species: Puchan
Reflexes 4D
dodge 5D, hand-to-hand combat 6D+1
Endurance 3D
Knowledge 2D
Confidence 3D
willpower 4D
Gender: Male
Coordination 2D
Strength 6D
lifting 7D
Perception 2D
language: English 3D
Charisma 2D
disguise 2D+2

Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 36

Racial notes: The Puchans are distant cousins to the Arquillians. Like the Arquillians, they are strong and single-minded. However, their fast reactions usually give them the advantage in a fight (+1D to Reflexes when determining initiative). Their toughened skin also provides them better protection (+1D to Endurance). The Puchans also require a large quantity of wood in their diet (they have sharp teeth suited for this).

Quote: "Mmm. Good wood. My favorite: cherry."

T'tame is attending the convention to disrupt it. He thinks roleplaying games are evil, the downfall of humanity. He has made it his mission to give roleplaying games a bad name, and thus save the human race.

He wears blue jeans, a white T-shirt, a blue jean jacket, and canvas shoes. He has dark, thick, wavy hair. His eyes are large, but almost slits. He otherwise looks human. He will not arrive at the convention until noon. He will grudgingly pay the entrance fee but signs his name as "Matt Oj." He will wander around the entire convention, pausing at tables and making snide but brief comments to people. He avoids the Con Store and the dealer area and looks disdainfully at the art exhibit before moving on. He is constantly chewing on a wooden popsicle stick. When he finishes eating one, he takes another out of his black leather bag. Usually he takes the stick out of his mouth before he makes a comment. His remarks include: "This stuff is dangerous"; "You could get hurt playing that"; "You really ought to find better things to do with your time"; "Roleplaying games are evil, evil I say"; and so on. He never sticks around for long, so people aren't sure that they heard him right. He's usually given odd looks and then ignored. He waits until the costume contest at 4:00 PM before he attempts any real disruption of the convention.

T'tame is a registered alien who has taken up residence in the area. Men in Black has had no unpleasant encounters with him in the past. He does have his alien registration card.

Perception 2D
security 2D+2
surveillance 2D+1
Confidence 2D
interrogation 2D+1, intimidation 2D+1
Charisma 2D
Character Points: 1
Fate Points: 0
Body Points: 29

Equipment: Each guard wears a uniform with name badge and carries a retractable baton and a walkie-talkie. The baton does STR+1D+2 damage.

Convention Staff

Although the staff will attempt to handle any problem that arises by themselves, they will call a security guard if they judge the need. All the staff is knowledgeable about the city and where all the rooms and tables are, though they will have to look up when a specific game or seminar is being played. They are the only ones wearing official StarCon T-shirts.

From 9:00 to noon, Jeff Marion works the Con Store. He's relieved by Karanne Halran, who works until the Bazaar closes. Jeff spends the morning reading a chemistry textbook and taking notes. He pays attention to who is at the tables, making sure nothing walks off on its own. Karanne reads a science fiction novel while watching the tables. Neither Jeff nor Karanne remember seeing either T'tame or Fahey. However, both Jeff and Karanne can provide descriptions of the professors participating in the convention as presenters or gamemasters.

If the staff is questioned about any "unusual people" coming into the question, they will say something like, "Can you be a little more specific? This is a gaming convention after all." If the characters ask for descriptions of any of the gamemasters or seminar presenters, the convention staff will know very little. If the characters are persistent, then the staffers will tell them to look for Charlie, "Short guy, with a goatee. Very friendly. You can't miss him."

The big-wigs of the convention are Charles Kent, Frank Phern, and Dee-Dee Zippu. Charlie is the StarCon coordinator. He is short and stocky. He sports a goatee and just enough hair to cover the top of his head. Except for his 8:00 AM seminar in Room 1, Charlie wanders around the convention making user everything is going as smoothly as can be expected of a bunch of gamers. He takes lunch at noon in the office with Frank and Dee-Dee. Frank (over six feet; long, curly hair; and very thin) and Dee-Dee (about five feet and eight inches; short hair; and glasses) also wander around the convention looking like they know what they're doing. All three carry walkie-talkies.

Unlike the average convention staffer, Charlie, Dee-Dee, and Frank know all the seminar presenters (Easy [5] Knowledge roll) and some of the gamemasters (Difficult [18] Knowledge roll). Because of their other duties, they will not help the characters find anyone, beyond providing a description. Their only other recommendation is to post a note on the announcement board.

Use "Average Gamer" stats with these skills: all regular convention staff have first aid 2D+2 and scholar: StarCon 4D; Charlie, Frank, and Dee-Dee have business 3D, first aid 3D, scholar: roleplaying games 4D, scholar: StarCon 4D, and surveillance 3D. Charlie also has charm 3D.

Possible Overheard Conversations

(You can choose whether the characters can figure out who said each bit. If the characters are able to locate the speaker, decide how much information the cast member knows, and how much of it is accurate.)

"Did you get a look at that kid with the rabbit mask? That's the best job I've ever seen!"

"Do you think that guy really means it? About roleplaying games being evil?"

"I hope they catch those kids turning over those headstones. They say it's part of some ritual. That's too weird. I'll stick to roleplaying games, thank you."

"That chick with the red is sharp. She's got to be an alien."

"They should do something about that guy with the crazy hair. He's disrupting the convention."

"There's a girl at the computers right now. Man, is she ever good!"

"Did you see the lights in the sky last night? There's no way that was a plane!"

"That girl we played with today, did you catch how

she talked? I wonder where she's from to get an accent like that."

"Y'know that new CCG they have out? I like the art, but it's so expensive."

"Who do you think'll win the contest? I'm betting on the rabbit-kid."

"Did you hear what happened at the bar last night?" (If the players question the speaker about this, paraphrase the conversation in "Time Events: 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM," later in this Lab.)

(For Men in Black agents only) "I wonder why Todd was being so secretive today. Usually he has so much to say about alien encounters."

(For Club members only) "Did you see those crazy people in the three-piece suits? I wonder if they're pretending to be techno-rebels or something."

(After 12:00 PM) "Dr. Weber's new game is great. That kid with the mask was way too good. Her sabotaging was so smooth you never knew what happened."

(After 4:00 PM) "Do you believe all the stuff those profs had to say? I don't think any aliens have visited here. That's too weird."

Stock Encounters

Use these stock encounters whenever you would like to slow the characters or need to liven up the scenario. The encounters listed specifically for each group can be used multiple times. The encounters listed under "For Either" are designed for a single use. The numbering is for reference purposes only; the encounters may be used in any order.

For Men in Black Agents: (1) The FAC cast members are in the same area, talking to whomever the players had decided they would like to speak with.

(2) T'tame, (see sidebar, above), is in the same area. He sees the MiB agents and whispers to the nearest gamer while pointing at them. Then he scowls and moves rapidly away. (He told the gamer, "Watch out for those guys." He doesn't want them to interfere with his plans — see his entry in the Appendix for details.)

For Club Members: (1) Official-looking people in dark suits are present, speaking to the desired person. On a Moderate (14) Scholar: Alien Encounters or some similar skill roll, a player realizes that these might be Men in Black personnel. Of course, the information that the person remembers about the agents is generally wrong: the person recalls tales of gaunt men dressed in black who travel about harassing people.

(2) T'tame approaches to the player characters and attempts to lecture them on the evils of roleplaying games. (This encounter can also be used if the characters figure out who Fahey is too soon. By the time they can get away from T'tame, Fahey will have moved on.)

For Either: (1) Someone hurrying through the crowd bumps into one of the characters. She looked startled and dashes off, not glancing back. If the characters decide to pursue her, give them a good chase through and around groups of people, chairs, and tables. You will need to roll initiative for each round. Whomever gets the initiative gets to move; everyone else is blocked from forward progress. If the cast member gets the initiative for three of five rounds (or the characters break off the chase sooner), she gets away. If one of the characters gets initiative for three of five rounds, that person catches her. The cast member protests loudly, saying that she's gong to be late for her game/meeting (as appropriate). This is true; bumping into the characters merely disrupted her preoccupied mind (thus her startled expression).

(2) A gamer approaches the characters, saying that he has seen the person they are looking for and that she just left out the auditorium doors several minutes ago. The gamer then excuses himself; he has a meeting with his friends in a few minutes. Note that this information is unverifiable. If anyone near the auditorium doors is asked if they have seen the person the characters are looking for, they will say no. (In fact, except as noted in their descriptions, none of the leading or secondary cast members leave the building during the convention.)

(3) One of the characters is the victim of a pickpocket (use "Average Gamer" stats except he has sleight of hand at 3D). The difficulty number for the attempt is determined by a Perception roll (though don't tell the player why he or she is rolling). If the thief is successful, allow the other characters a chance to see if they notice that something was swiped. Have the other players make Perception rolls, though, again, don't tell them why. The difficulty number is the thief's successful sleight of hand roll. Depending on who you decide to have the cast member bump into, he may take a wallet, phone, weapon, spectral analyzer, or neuralyzer. Things could get real interesting if the thief snatched some alien tech. (Remember that the character will discover the missing item the next time he or she wants to use it. In other words, don't let the character use something he or she doesn't have.)

Timetable of Events

7:00 AM

The artists, dealers, and some of the convention staff arrive at the back entrance, by the stage door.

7:30 AM

Gamers begin to arrive. They mill around, chatting or flipping through convention guides. When the convention officially opens, they go inside to check in. Jon Nguyen and Mary Raphael are at the registration table until 12:00 PM.

For Club Members: If the characters decide to stake out the place between now and 9:30, they won't notice anyone really unusual entering the convention (really — how "usual" can a gamer be?). Be sure to ask the characters how long they will wait and what they intend to do next.

Depending on how long they decide to wait, you can describe a few of the costumed attendees, including a alien-looking woman who enters alone. (This is Kyli Shannen; her description is under "Costume Contest Participants.") If they decide to go after her, they will need to check in to the convention. It will take them an hour, all told, to find out that she's not the one they're after.

When the characters register, be sure to make them antsy by having the staff members ask them questions, on such topics as previous convention attendance and plans for the day. The staff members might also recommend certain games or seminars. If the group is from the area, the cast members might know the characters; then you could throw in more personal questions (such as, "How's the alien hunt going?").

8:00 AM

Sanura Mylonas, a Stroodwa disguised today as a human, arrives at the convention. The Bazaar opens. Jeff Marion works the Con Store until noon (see "Convention Staff" for more details).

For Men in Black Agents: If the agents reach the convention and begin to scan the area with a spectral analyzer, Sanura will register on it. They can check with headquarters to see if a Stroodwa is supposed to be in the area; they will find that she's registered. If the agents decide to go after her, they will need to check in to the convention. By confronting Sanura, they waste about an hour just to find out that she's not their person.

"You're under arrest for violating section 84-26 of the Tye-Co treaty."

Note that if any of the MiB agents decide to take their weapons into the convention, they had better be well concealed. This means that larger weapons cannot be taken in.

When the agents register, be sure to make them antsy by having the staff members ask them questions, on such topics as previous convention attendance, costume choice (if the agents are wearing suits), and plans for the day. The staff members might also recommend certain games or seminars.

For Club Members: Four people in sharp black suits make an appearance (the Men in Black cast members), looking very efficient (appearances can be deceiving).

9:00 AM

For Men in Black Agents: Four people show up, three of whom are wearing black T-shirts with FAC printed in white, LED-like letters on the front. The fourth person, the tough-looking one, is wearing a heavy, plain, black sweatshirt. (These are the FAC cast members.) If someone is watching the front entrance, that person notices that the staff members seem to know the FAC members well. Immediately after registering, they examine the bulletin board. Finding nothing, they move on to check the rest of the convention.

9:30 AM

Fahey arrives, wearing her scarf wrapped around her face and neck, much as others are doing (it's cold!) As she walks up to the building, she greets another costumed attendee. They chat for a while as they enter. If the characters are sitting in front of the building, she will ignore them. She checks in and receives her badge, tickets, and costume number. She then takes a note out of her skirt pocket and posts it on the bulletin board. After that, she goes to her first event.

The body of the note reads: "Thank you for coming. I will meet you after the costume contest in the bazaar. — Your Radio Friend."

For Men in Black Agents: The note is addressed to "FAC."

For Club Members: The note is addressed to one of the characters or, if the group has a name, that name.

9:45 AM

If the characters decide to question the staff at the registration table about a woman who sings everything (or some similar description), then Jon and Mary will remember Fahey on a successful Moderate (12) Knowledge roll (they signed in a lot of people). They don't remember her name, though they do remember that she looked a lot like a rabbit, but with big, curly hair. They think she wore a sweatshirt, but the make-up job was great.

10:00 AM

Fahey is at her game event.

For Men in Black Agents: The FAC cast members return to the bulletin board. If the note is still there, they take it. This means that if the agents check the board after this time, they will not find any notes for FAC there.

For Club Members: If the characters decide to ask at the registration table about any unusual attendees (such as a woman who sings) or they check back with the table, they will be told that a bunch of people all dressed in black suits were also asking for her. If the characters had not asked previously about Fahey, the staff with give them the description detailed in "9:45 AM." If they have already asked, then the staff will not have any new information.

10:30 AM

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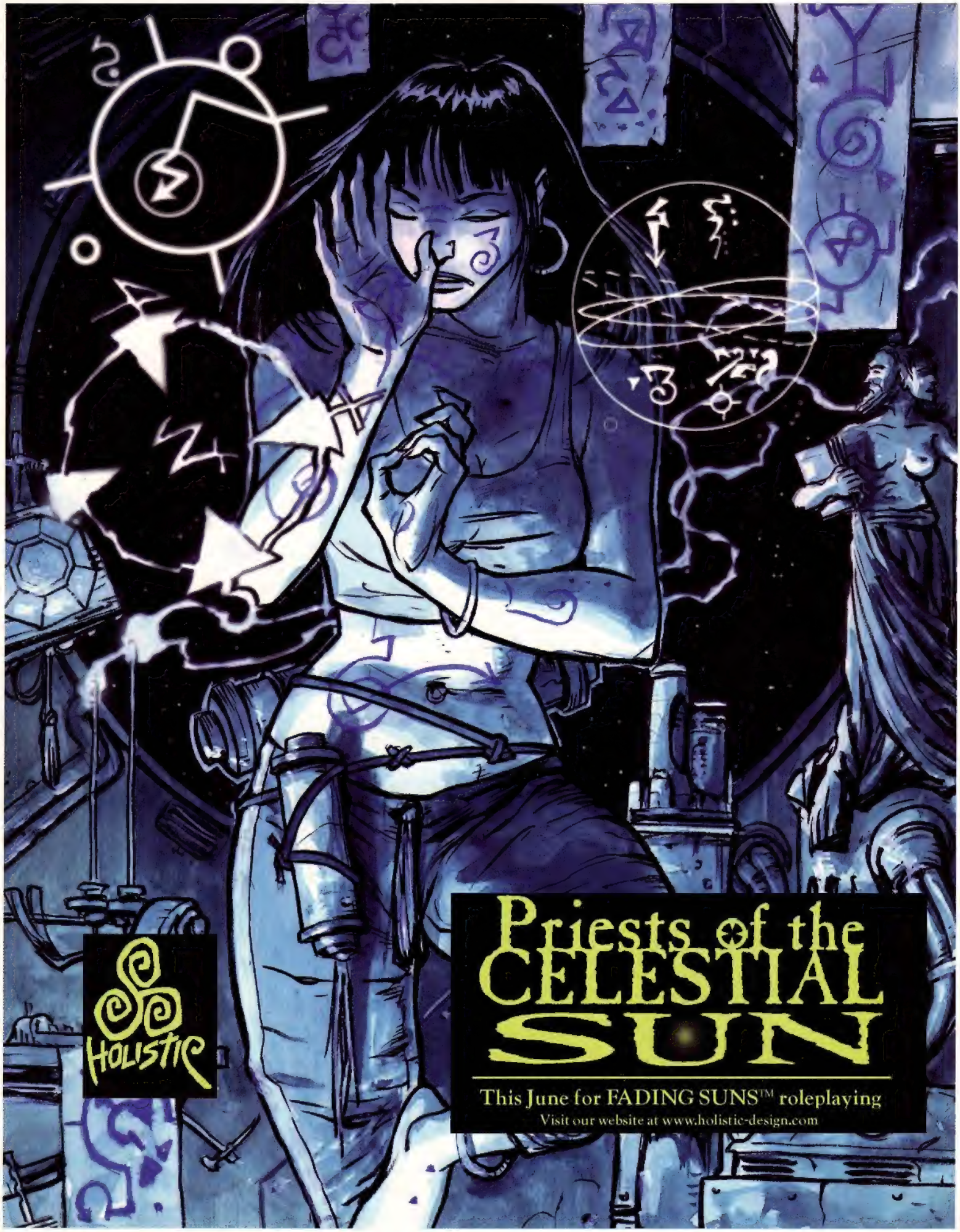
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The costume contest judges arrive by the back door, go to the office, and get their lists.

11:00 AM

The costume contest judges enter the Bazaar.

10:00 AM to 12:00 PM

If the characters wander into the open gaming area during this time, they overhear this conversation between a man and a woman, both gamers. The appropriate opposite cast member group (either Men in Black or FAC) will also be in the same area. (Coincidence? I think not.)

Read the following to the players:

The woman says, "So a man walks into the bar ..."

Her companion interrupts with "That must've hurt."

The woman glares and continues: "You're not listening to me! I said: A man walks into the bar last night and says to George, 'Is the bartender here?' George gives him a funny look and says, 'Yeah. Why?' So the guy — get this — the guy chomps on the bar! Then he spits and grabs George by the shirt. 'Liar,' he shouts and shoves George. Pushed 'im right into the back counter. Then the guy stomps out. Can you believe that?"

The man shakes his head, and then the woman changes the subject to a discussion of the lousy gamemastering of her last event.

If the characters decide to question the gamers, they find that her name is Joan Kristian, and "this is my brother Paul." The "guy" was young — early twenties — with dark, "scary" hair ("Looks like the boyfriend of a fashion doll," says Joan) and carried a black leather backpack. "Y'know," says the woman, "I bet you that he'll be at the con today. Looked the type. I'll point him out to you if I see him. I could never forget hair like that." (If needed as a distraction at some later point in the game, have Joan come up to the characters and point out T'tame to them.)

12:00 PM

T'tame puts in his appearance. Jon and Mary leave the registration table and wander over to the Art Exhibit (where they stay for the rest of the convention). Grumpy Schaddokin and Tracy Arlow take Jon and Mary's place until 4:00 PM. Karanne Halran relieves Jeff at the Con Store. She works here until 6:00 PM (see "Convention Staff" for more details). Charles Kent, Dee-Dee Zippu, and Frank Phern (the top dogs of the convention) have lunch in the office.

If the characters question any of the staff at the registration table about a woman who sings (or give a similar description), Grumpy and Tracy will say that they haven't seen anyone of that description entering, but they may be able to "ask Jon and Mary, who worked in the morning. They're probably gabbing with the artists." If the characters check, no matter what time it is after 12:00 PM, the two morning staffers will be there.

Fahey enters the Bazaar. She speaks with each of the costume contest judges soon after coming in. (See "Costume Contest Judges" later in this lab for more details.)

12:15 PM

Fahey walks by the Computer Haus table on her way to End of the Universe. There she chats with the dealer, Joe Aznur, for about ten minutes. They talk about New Age meditation techniques before Fahey continued on to Deen's Trains and Games. At that table, she visits Amie Patrinski at Deen's Trains and Games. They exchange ideas on how to get players to roleplay better.

1:00 PM

If they haven't remembered already, have one of the players realize that they haven't eat since breakfast. If the players choose not to eat, they must take a -1 to all their rolls for the rest of the afternoon (grumbling stomachs are distracting). No food is served at the convention; either the whole group leaves or someone has to be sent out to get lunch.

2:00 PM

Fahey attends her seminar. Sanura leaves for lunch.

3:00 PM

At this time, the judges leave to confer in their decision. Sanura returns to the convention, and spends the next hour playing games at the Computer Haus.

3:45 PM

The costume contest judges and Charles Kent enter the Bazaar and get ready on the stage.

Costume Contest Judges: Each carries around a pen and a clipboard with a stack of sheets listing the people participating in the costume contest. The ranking is based on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the best. Those who didn't show up before 10:00 have been crossed out on the sheets. All the judges wear regular convention badges. Use the "Average Gamer" stats with these skills: business 3D, charm 3D, interrogation 3D, and surveillance 3D.

Unless the characters provide some really good excuse, none of the judges will answer any questions about the participants interviewed or about themselves. To questions about the participants, they will

Alien Dossier: Sanura Mylonas

Species: Stroodwa
Gender: Female
Reflexes 2D
Coordination 2D
dodge 2D+2, piloting: car 2D+2
sleight of hand 3D
Strength 1D+2
Endurance 2D
Knowledge 4D+1
Perception 4D
computer ops 6D+1
business 4D+2, language: English 4D+2
Confidence 4D+2
Charisma 4D
con 5D
charm 4D+1, disguise 4D+2
Character Points: 3
Fate Points: 1
Body points: 28
Quote: "It's not my fault (this time)."

This is the name this member of the Stroodwa uses on Earth. Sanura is a registered alien attending the convention for fun. She will leave for lunch at 2:00 PM and return before 3:00 PM. She will be in the Bazaar from 3:00 to 4:00 PM playing computer games. For the rest of the time, she attends games and seminars.

In her natural form, Sanura is an opaque brown blob with two big, round, brown eyes set in one side. Her skin is rough to the touch. As a human, she has decided on a plain appearance. She's wearing blue jeans and a college sweatshirt. She carries a backpack containing dice, pencils, paper, and her wallet.

Sanura can communicate telepathically in her natural form with others of her species through touch. She, like other members of her race, eats by absorbing her food. She does, however, remember to pretend to chew. Like other members of her race, she has an allergy to chocolate. If she is exposed to it, she must add +1 to the difficulty number of any action she attempts.

If the Men in Black agents decide to check her out because she registered on their spectral analyzer, she will be surprised to be accosted by the MiB agents, especially considering that she hasn't tried any practical jokes on anyone (lately). She will recognize that they are from the Men in Black and will chat amiably with them. She has her alien registration card with her.

say something like, "You'll have to wait until the show at four PM." To other questions, the characters will be handed business cards the first time the questions are asked and told to contact them at a later time. On subsequent times, the judge will ask the characters to leave him or her alone until after the contest.

Actually, when Fahey entered the Bazaar at 12:00 PM, she approached each of the judges, talking to them for a few minutes. They were all suitably impressed by her "costume" and gave her high marks on their sheets. They will all be able to clearly remember what she looked like.

"Did you get a look at that kid in the rabbit mask? That's the best job I've ever seen..."

Judge 1: Tim MacNaill is a costume designer for the Renaissance Theatre Guild. He's tall, thin, and looks great in his plain button-down shirt and blue jeans.

Judge 2: Ed Greely is the owner of End of the Universe (a comic and used-book store). He's short and wears a flannel shirt and blue jeans. He's friendly and well known among the younger members of crowd.

Judge 3: Wilma Racine organizes fashion shows for many of the local clothing merchants. She wears a blue suit dress and low black heels. Her long hair has been pulled into French roll.

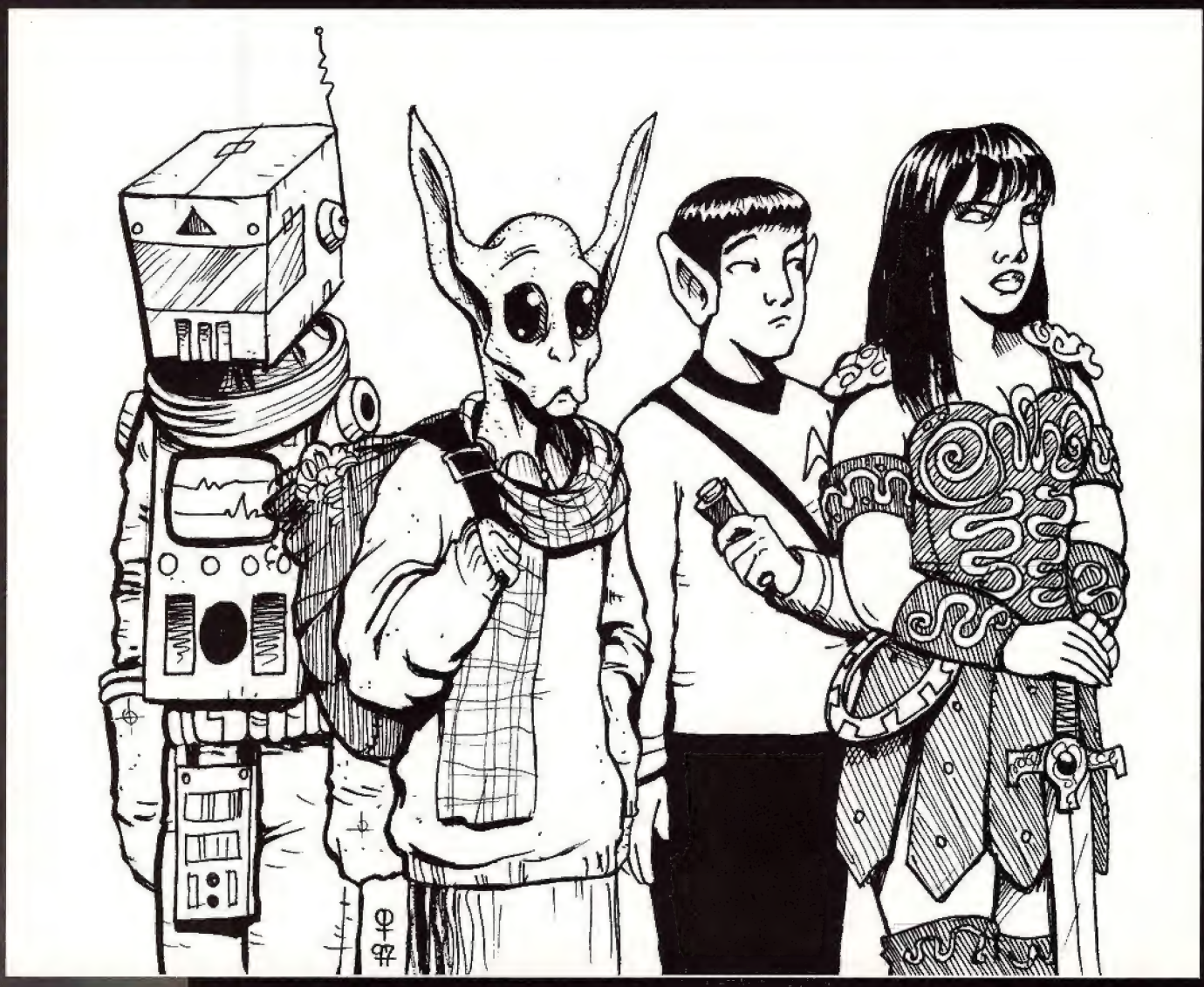
Costume Contest Participants

There are eighteen people participating, including Fahey. There are at least two others with remarkably well crafted costumes, complete with masks. For example, one of the contestants, Kyli Shannen, has died her hair bright red, and skillfully applied facial ridges.

Use "Average Gamer" stats for all participants.

4:00 PM

Jeff Osric and Machk Vernon relieve Grumpy and Tracy; Jeff and Machk's shift ends at 8:00 PM. Fahey quietly enters the Bazaar, without her wig on, and goes toward the show stage. She stands with the other contestants



and does not approach the characters, if they are present.

When you reach this part of game time, ask the players where their characters are located in the convention center. Do not allow any unreasonable adjustments in location (for example, if they had been searching the far end of the Gaming Hall, don't allow them to move their characters to the hallway near the Bazaar.) As a reminder, the Bazaar is about 110 feet long and 70 feet wide. Keep moving in this section; don't give the players long to consider their actions.

For Men in Black Agents: As the players look for Fahey in the Bazaar, have them make a Moderate (12) Perception roll. Those who succeed notice both Fahey and the FAC cast members coming in, from separate entrances.

The players will have five rounds before Fahey decides to bolt for the nearest door. For those five rounds, have each player roll initiative. You roll initiative for the FAC cast members as a group, who start at the main entrance to the Bazaar. Whoever wins initiative may move forward as far as desired, for a maximum of twenty feet, unless some special ability allows him or her to do otherwise. The others are stuck by the crowd. Depending on where the players began, if they were on the edge of the Bazaar, they would need to move in all the rounds in order to catch Fahey. If the FAC cast members beat the characters to Fahey, they all leave immediately. On the sixth round, roll initiative for Fahey if she hasn't already left. If she wins, she makes it to the back door of the Bazaar, where her "getaway" car (a red Mustang) is waiting.

For Club Members: As the players look for Fahey in the Bazaar at this time, have them make a Moderate (12) Perception roll. Those who succeed notice both Fahey entering and a group of people in dark suits, from separate sides. The dark suits appear to be searching for someone.

The players will have five rounds before Fahey makes her decision. For those five rounds, have each player roll initiative. You roll initiative for the Men in Black cast members as a group, who start at the main entrance to the Bazaar. Whoever wins initiative may move forward as far as desired, for a maximum of twenty feet. The others are stuck by the crowd. Depending on where the players began, if they were on the edge of the Bazaar, they would need to move in all the rounds in order to get near Fahey. If the Men in Black agents could beat the player characters to Fahey, roll initiative for Fahey. If she wins, she makes it to the back door of the Bazaar, where her "getaway" car (a red Mustang) is waiting.

Scene 3: Follow that Guy!

But wait! It's not over yet: On the seventh round, T'tame gets first initiative. He has made his way to the main entrance of the Bazaar and draws a minibomb out of his backpack. He yells, "I told you roleplaying games were dangerous," and tosses it into the Bazaar. He runs out the front door, shoving people aside. As he exits, the MG-72 minibomb explodes, creating a large quantity of smoke — enough to prompt everyone to exit the room as quickly as possible. The only adverse affect is that everyone coughs for a while.

If the characters decide to chase T'tame, they must do so within the two rounds after he throws the minibomb. T'tame takes off at a rate of fifty feet per round, to his car parked at the edge of the lot. Meanwhile, one of the convention staff has called the police. Killing is not recommended (too much to explain), but the MiB agents do have a chance at stunning him.

If all the characters decide to go after T'tame (and thus leave Fahey), she will exit the convention by the back door (to plan for her next encounter).

Scene 4: Debriefing

For Men in Black Agents: When everything is settled down and the agents have returned to headquarters, have the agents fill out "MiB Assignment Debrief XA-91970/Q" (on page 91 of the *Men in Black* Roleplaying Game). Meanwhile, you'll need to decide on the rewards. If the MiB players accomplish their goal of preventing Fahey from announcing her presence and of apprehending the other alien, they could be given the assignment of finding out if other transmissions occurred. If the players fail, consider dreaming up less-desirable jobs. As for Character and Fate Points, refer to the table included here. Every player should receive at least one Fate Point and one Character Point. Individual players may receive a maximum of seventeen Character Points and two Fate Points.

For Club Members: If the club members are able to contact the alien and escape before the Men in Black cast members catch them, they gain an ally in the alien and an enemy in the agents (who will be after them to erase their memories). The characters may not know this if they don't connect the people in the black suits to anything unusual, which may be possible if the agents don't show up in many of the same scenes. If the characters are unable to make contact, then they loose the alien ally, but that shouldn't prevent them from trying to find out more information later.

If the characters decided to be helpful and catch T'tame, such kindness should also be rewarded. Additionally, if the group does not have a formal debriefing (as Men in Black agents would) then you may wish to give the players a few extra Character Points for roleplaying, the exact number depending on how well they did.

Every player should receive at least one Fate Point and one Character Point. Individual players may receive a maximum of seventeen Character Points and two Fate Points (in addition to any received through Cue Card play).

Convention Layout Key

Information designed to be read to the players is in italics. The map itself is part of the StarCon brochure, on pg. 43-44.

1. Main Entrance

At the registration table, there are a couple of extra convention guides for people to flip through but not to take. Everyone who registers receives a badge (which they print their name on) and a convention booklet. A map of the convention has been taped to the table. To one side of the registration table, there is a bulletin board for announce-

ments and messages. The ticket booth here is not being used. The registration table is staffed by two people throughout the day. The people change every four hours (see the "Convention Staff" description for specifics). There is also one security guard.

2. The Bazaar

The Bazaar is about 110 feet long and 70 feet wide. There is a back door to the Bazaar located on the wall to the left of the stage. The dealers and artists enter through this door when the Bazaar opens and closes. During the rest of the convention hours, it is locked from the inside, so that people can still get out but not come in.

(A) Dealer tables. *These include Deen's Trains and Games, End of the Universe, and the Computer Haus, as well as any others you decide to include. Both Deen's Trains and Games and End of the Universe are staffed by one person; the Computer Haus has two people.* They remain the same throughout the day. You may add more tables, if you choose. There will be at least two sets of computers set up at the Computer Haus table.

(B) The Con Store. *This is staffed by one person [see the "Convention Staff" description for more information]. It has two tables lined up on the wall are covered (in a single layer) with games. A third, near the cashier, has two boxes of gaming magazines and supplements, a folder of collectible cards, and the cashier. A table for the cashier is set perpendicular to the others. The cashier has a cash box and a binder containing a computer listing of all the games.* When a game is sold, the cashier checks it off in the binder and puts the money in the cash box.

(C) The stage. *The stage is raised a few feet above the main floor of the auditorium. It is built into the wall. Two sets of moveable steps, one on each end, have been set up to provide access to the stage area. On the stage, a portable sound system with a microphone on a stand have been assembled. This is where the Costume Contest Show is held.*

(D) Art Exhibit. *The long tables hold two artists each. Behind and on the tables are pieces of art for sale.* See the "Artists" description for more information.

3. Open gaming area

There are several small tables set up here, with lots of chairs. Along the wall by the Gaming Hall, there are some pay phones. Many of the tables have two or more people at them; a few have only one. The mixture of people here changes every few hours, but there is always at least one board or card game going. Additionally, there will always be at least one table open.

4. The Office

The door to this room is closed.

The door is locked. This is one of the Convention Center's two ticket offices (the other one is at the front entrance to the auditorium). This is where the convention staff meets, and the costume contest judges come here to get the lists and to confer. It also serves as a holding place for lost items. There is a table with soft drinks and snacks on it, and a telephone for local calls only.

5. The Gaming Hall

This a large room with numerous tables scattered throughout. Most of them are in use. The tables are marked with numbered index cards securely taped to each table. There are usually six chairs at a table, though some may have more or less depending how people have arranged them to suit their needs. There is about a two-foot space in between the tables when people are seated in the chairs, though sometimes less because people push the chairs out to move, roleplay, and so on. Attendees are standing, sitting, and walking around. It's especially busy at the end of each time slot as players move from one event to the next.

6. The Conference Rooms

This is where the seminars are held. These are clearly marked with a numbered index card taped to the door. Each room has a long table, with three chairs behind it, at one end and fifteen chairs arranged in rows in front of that.

Appendix: Ready to Play Characters

Unless the players ask, don't point out any particular attendees. If they *do* ask, always request that they describe what they are looking for. Then, behind a screen, your hand, or otherwise shielded, make a Moderate (14) Perception roll for the character with the highest value in this attribute. Succeeding at the roll indicates they notice someone fitting the description. Depending on how soon it is into the scenario, you may want to make the encounter a false alarm.

You don't have to give any of the cast members' names unless the players ask for it. Then, for most of the cast members, you can tell them the name the characters spot on the badge.

If the MiB agents attempt to use the neuralyzer in a public area, it will be noticed. A staff member outside of the area will check out the flash. Upon seeing everyone stunned except the MiB agents, the person will go to the office to call for the police. They will arrive in fifteen minutes.

If the Men in Black agents scan any room, there is a small possibility that they will find T'tame or Sanura. T'tame more likely will be found wandering among the gaming tables or the Bazaar.

Men in Black Agents

Included in the cast member list are four Men in Black agents, a human female, a human male, a Skook male, and an Arquillian female. In case your players wish to use these characters in this scenario, brief descriptions of significant characteristics are included with the stats. Use these descriptions only if your players have non-MiB characters.

Name: M
Species: Human
Gender: Female
Reflexes 3D
dodge 3D+2, hand-to-hand combat 3D+2
Coordination 3D
lockpicking 4D+1, marksmanship 3D+1
Endurance 3D
Strength 2D
Knowledge 4D+1
computer ops 5D+1, alien technology 5D, linguistics 4D+2, scholar: alien species 4D+2
Perception 3D+2
hide 4D+2, security 4D+2
Confidence 2D+2
Charisma 2D+2
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 36

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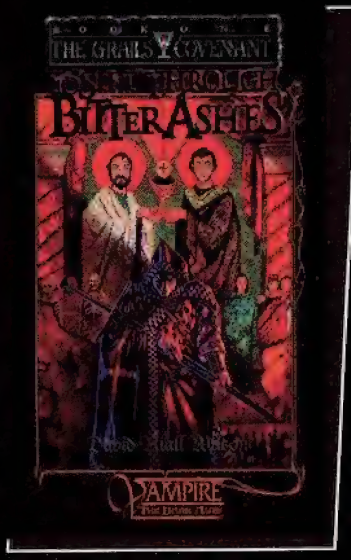

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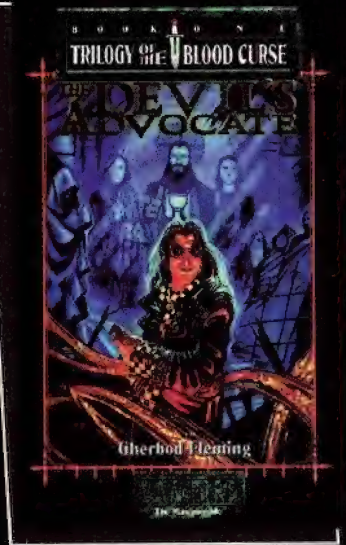

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THE DARK AGES

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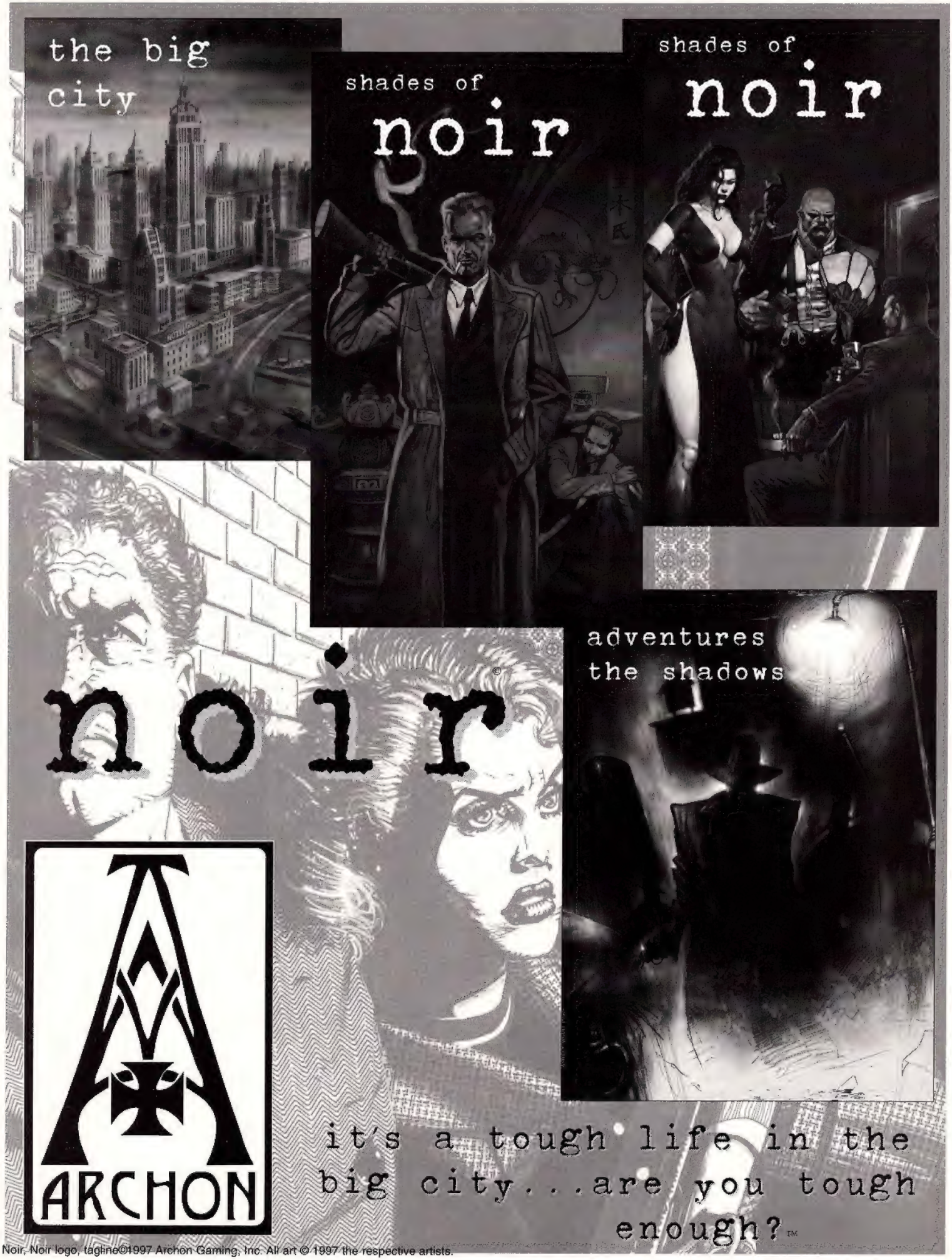


Noir, Noir logo, tagline©1997 Archon Gaming, Inc. All art © 1997 the respective artists.

Equipment: Cellular phone; spectral analyzer; MiB Special Issue (damage value 4D+1 [level 1]/3D+1 [level 2]/paralyzation, discharges 10); locksmithing kit (improves lockpicking roll by +1D when used)

Description: M has been with the agency long enough to deserve her leadership position, but not so long that her perception of the world has become jaded. She still does her job well because she wants to — not because "Zed said so."

Quote: "Welcome to Earth."

Name: D
Species: Human
Gender: Male
Species: Human
Reflexes 3D
dodge 3D+2, hand-to-hand combat 3D+2, piloting: car 4D
Coordination 3D
marksmanship 3D+1
Endurance 3D
Strength 2D
Knowledge 4D+1
first aid 5D, linguistics 5D+1, scholar: MiB procedures 4D+2
Perception 2D+1
hide 3D+2, security 3D+2, shadowing 3D+2
Confidence 3D+2
Charisma 2D+1
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 32
Equipment: Neuralyzer; cellular phone; plasma pistol (damage value 4D+2, ammo 10)

Description: D is great at taking orders: it's the best way to keep people from asking questions he'd rather not answer.

Quote: "What's next?"

Name: V
Species: Arquillian
Gender: Female
Reflexes 3D
hand-to-hand combat 4D
Coordination 2D+2
marksmanship 4D
Endurance 4D
ignore pain 4D+1, running 4D+1
Strength 4D
lifting 4D+1
Knowledge 2D+1
demolitions 3D+1, tracking 3D
Perception 3D
language: English 3D+2
Confidence 3D
intimidation 4D, willpower 3D+1
Charisma 2D
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 37
Equipment: Proto-cyclotron blaster (damage value 5D, ammo 100); plastic explosive (damage value 3D) and electrical blasting caps

Description: If strength can't handle it, V has a blaster that should solve the problem — when she's given the chance. Humans are a lot like Baltians: full of more talk than is good for them.

Quote: "The Baltians know nothing about our familial relations."

Name: F
Species: Skook
Gender: Male
Reflexes 4D
acrobatics 4D+2, climbing 4D+1, hand-to-hand combat 4D+2
Coordination 2D
marksmanship 2D+2, sleight of hand 2D+1
Endurance 2D+2
Strength 2D
Knowledge 3D+2
alien technology 4D, forgery 4D, linguistics 4D
Perception 3D
conceal 4D, language: English 4D, security 3D+1
Confidence 2D+2
streetwise 3D+1
Charisma 4D
charm 4D+1
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 29
Special Abilities: Limited Regeneration (gain back 1 body point per round of combat); Limited Regeneration (regrow body parts, though a finite number of heads can be regenerated)
Equipment: Laser pistol (damage value 4D+2, ammo 10)

Description: E is different from most Skooks. After all, he volunteered to join the Men in Black. He believes he doesn't get the respect he deserves; E is under the impression that the other agents treat him like it's his fault other Skooks can't keep their hands off all the cool technology just lying around.

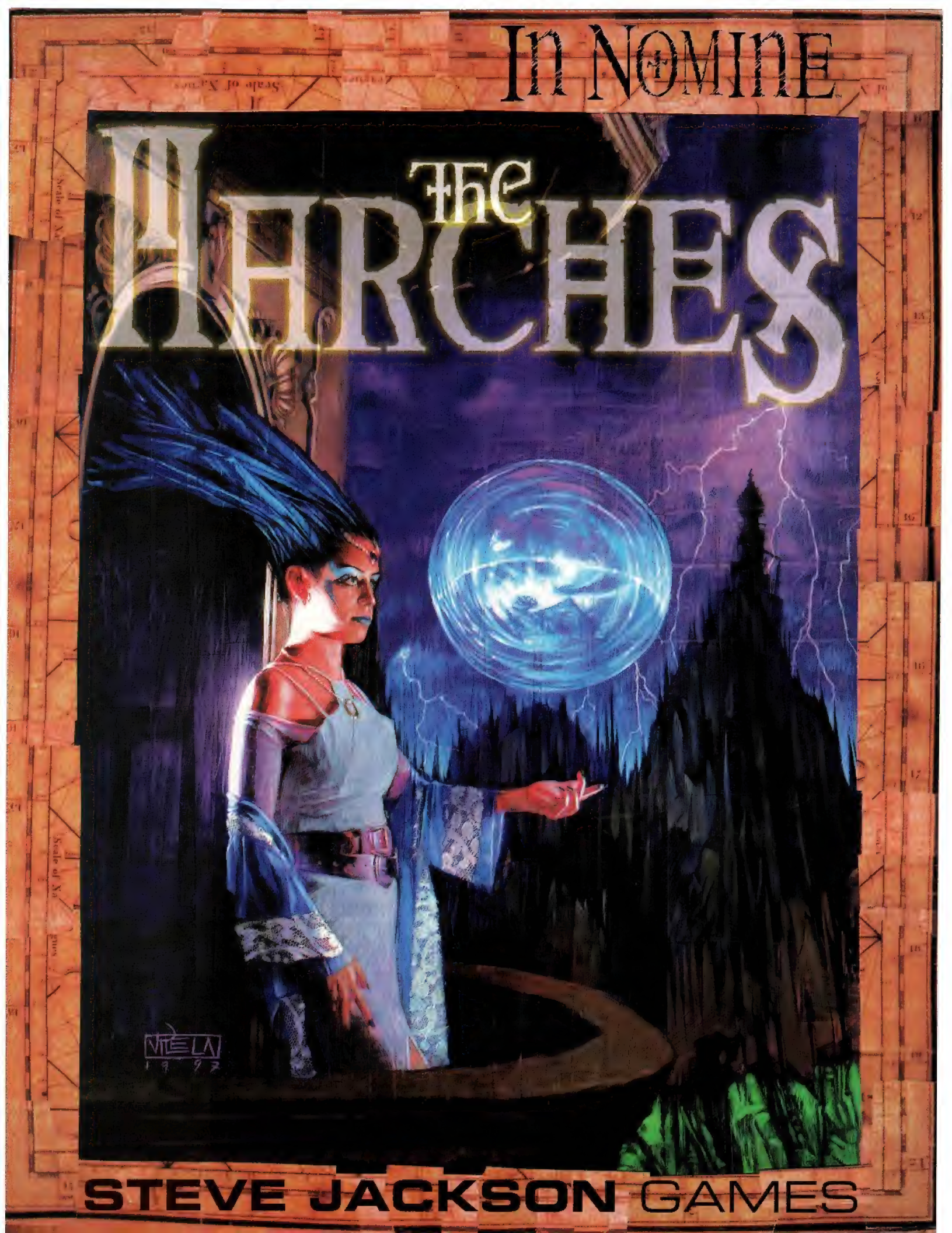
Quote: "If you're not using that, can I have it?"

Members of the Friends of Aliens Club

There are four members of the Friends of Aliens Club, two women and two men.

Name: Todd Tryton
Species: Human
Gender: Male
Reflexes 2D
hand-to-hand combat 3D
Coordination 2D
Endurance 3D
Strength 2D
Knowledge 4D
linguistics 4D+2, scholar: electronics 4D+2, alien encounters 4D+2, radio operations 4D+2
Perception 4D
artist: photographer 4D+1, business 4D+1
Confidence 3D+1
Willpower 3D+2
Charisma 3D+2
Persuasion 4D+1
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 30
Equipment: Camera; cellular phone

Description: Todd, a graduate assistant at the university, started the Friends of Aliens Club along with Gwendolyn. He has all the books on the subject. He


In Nomine
The Harches
STEVE JACKSON GAMES

doesn't believe in an alien menace, instead believing that they are here to impart wisdom. When they decide the time is right, Todd is going to be ready for them. He's wearing a black FAC T-shirt and jeans to the convention. All the FAC members came in Todd's Blazer.

Quote: "They're out there. And I'm going to find them."

Name: Gwendolyn Artus
Species: Human
Gender: Female
Reflexes 2D
hth combat 3D
Coordination 3D
sleight of hand 3D+1
missile weapon 3D+1 (compound bow +1)
Endurance 4D
Strength 2D
Knowledge 3D
computer ops 3D+1, first aid 4D, medicine 4D
Perception 3D
business 3D+1, conceal 3D+2, hide 3D+2, surveillance 3D+1, tracking 3D+1
Confidence 4D
Charisma 3D
charm 3D+2
Body points: 37
Fate Points: 5
Equipment: None

Description: Gwendolyn's avid interest in hunting has give her the opportunity to see some strange events. She chanced to meet Todd at a convention they were attending. Because of their experiences, they decided to form FAC. Like Todd, Gwendolyn believes aliens are here to help humans. She is also a graduate assistant at the university.

She's wearing black jeans and her FAC T-shirt with a black turtleneck underneath.

Quote: "I've seen things you wouldn't believe — but you should."

Name: Harvey Paweluca
Species: Human
Gender: Male
Reflexes 3D+1
hand-to-hand combat 4D+2
Coordination 3D+1
marksmanship 4D, piloting: car 3D+2
Endurance 3D
running 3D+2
Strength 5D
lifting 5D+1
Knowledge 2D
Perception 2D
conceal 2D+2
Confidence 3D
intimidation 4D, streetwise 3D+2, willpower 3D+1
Charisma 2D+1
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body Points: 35
Equipment: Cellular phone; Smith & Wesson .38 (damage value 3D, ammo 6)

Description: Harvey is Gwendolyn's boyfriend and a sheriff's deputy. He's involved with FAC to make her happy, but he's quietly cynical about their "mission." He doesn't believe there are really any aliens, because he personally hasn't seen one. He hates to be wrong. He thinks Todd could use some counseling, but he's otherwise harmless. Harvey is wearing a black sweatshirt and jeans to the convention. He has his gun hidden under his sweatshirt (and a concealed weapons permit in his wallet).

Quote: "Whatever you say, dear."

Name: Suzi Numata
Species: Human
Gender: Female
Reflexes 3D
acrobatics 3D+2, hand-to-hand combat 3D+1
Coordination 3D
lockpicking 4D
Endurance 4D
Strength 3D
Knowledge 3D
computer ops 5D, scholar: electronics 4D
Perception 2D+1
security 3D
Confidence 3D
con 3D+2, interrogation 3D+1
Charisma 2D+2
persuasion 3D
Character Points: 5
Fate Points: 1
Body points: 37

Equipment: Laptop computer; locksmithing kit (improves lockpicking roll by +1D when used)

Description: Suzi is intent on being the best hacker there is, and she'll take every chance to practice. When Gwendolyn, a friend from college, told her about the new Friends of Aliens Club, she decided to help out. Cracking an alien conspiracy is just the sort of challenge she loves. She is a senior at the university. To the convention, Suzi is wearing a black FAC T-shirt and light blue stretch pants.

Quote: "Getting in is my speciality."

Final Note

A prop for this adventure is included on pages 43-44 — a mock-up program of StarCon. Cut out the page and fold along the dotted line, and *voila!* Instant RPG reality!

The map on the back of the program is the actual map of the adventure. You may wish to restrict access to it, or modify details to confound the players. After all, the map on the program isn't necessarily the way the Convention Center is laid out...

WEST END GAMES PRESENTS

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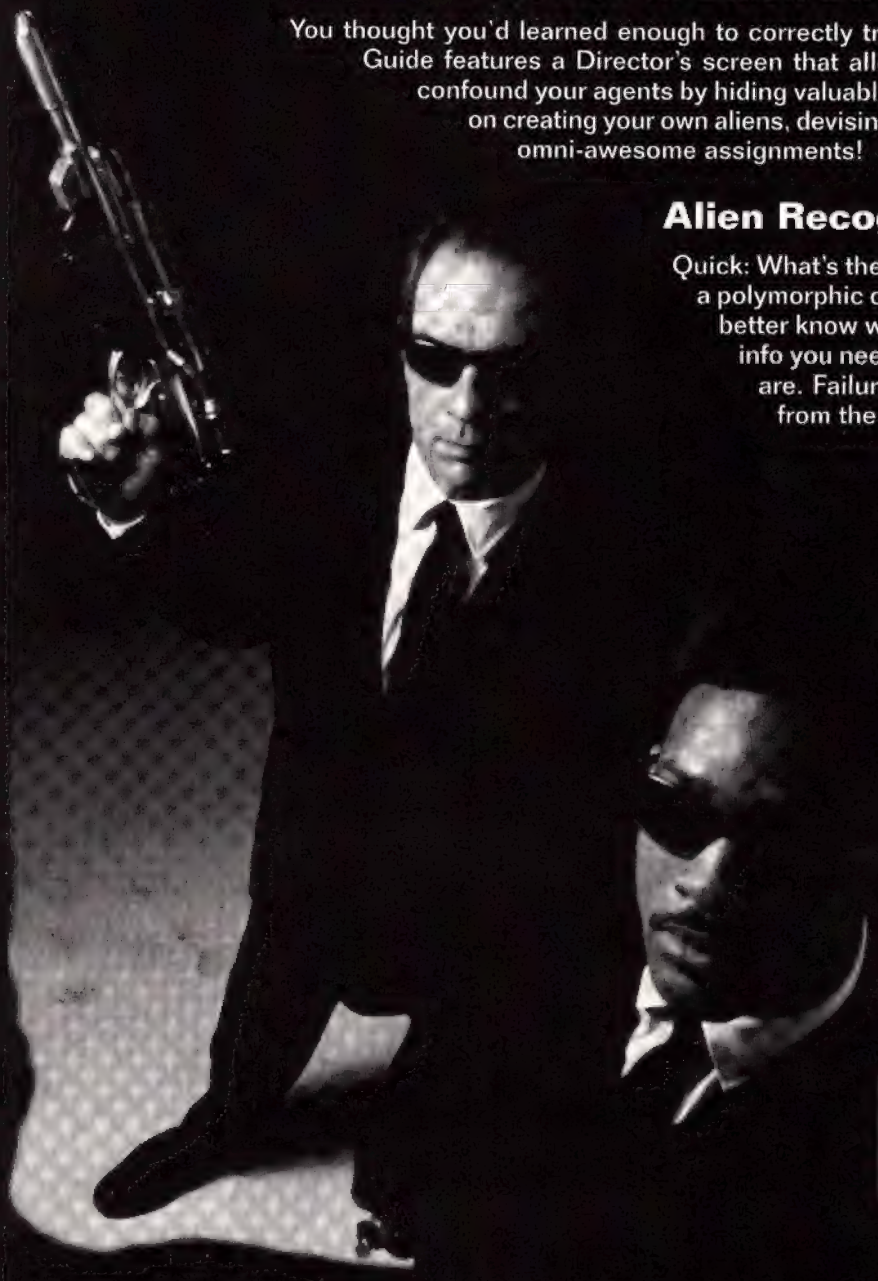

Alien Recognition Guide Volume One

Quick: What's the difference between a dichoptic arthropod and a polymorphic ophidian? Too late—you're dead. Next time you better know which alien is which. The ARGVO gives you the info you need to figure out who the "scum of the universe" are. Failure to procure this data may result in dismissal from the agency...

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Your agents are getting bored with the same old assignments. Now it's time to spring something completely unexpected (and far too dangerous) on them. This collection of folders includes several simulations specially designed for impromptu play. And there's also a special bonus: cool color cards you can use for puppet show—er, I mean, for serious roleplaying.

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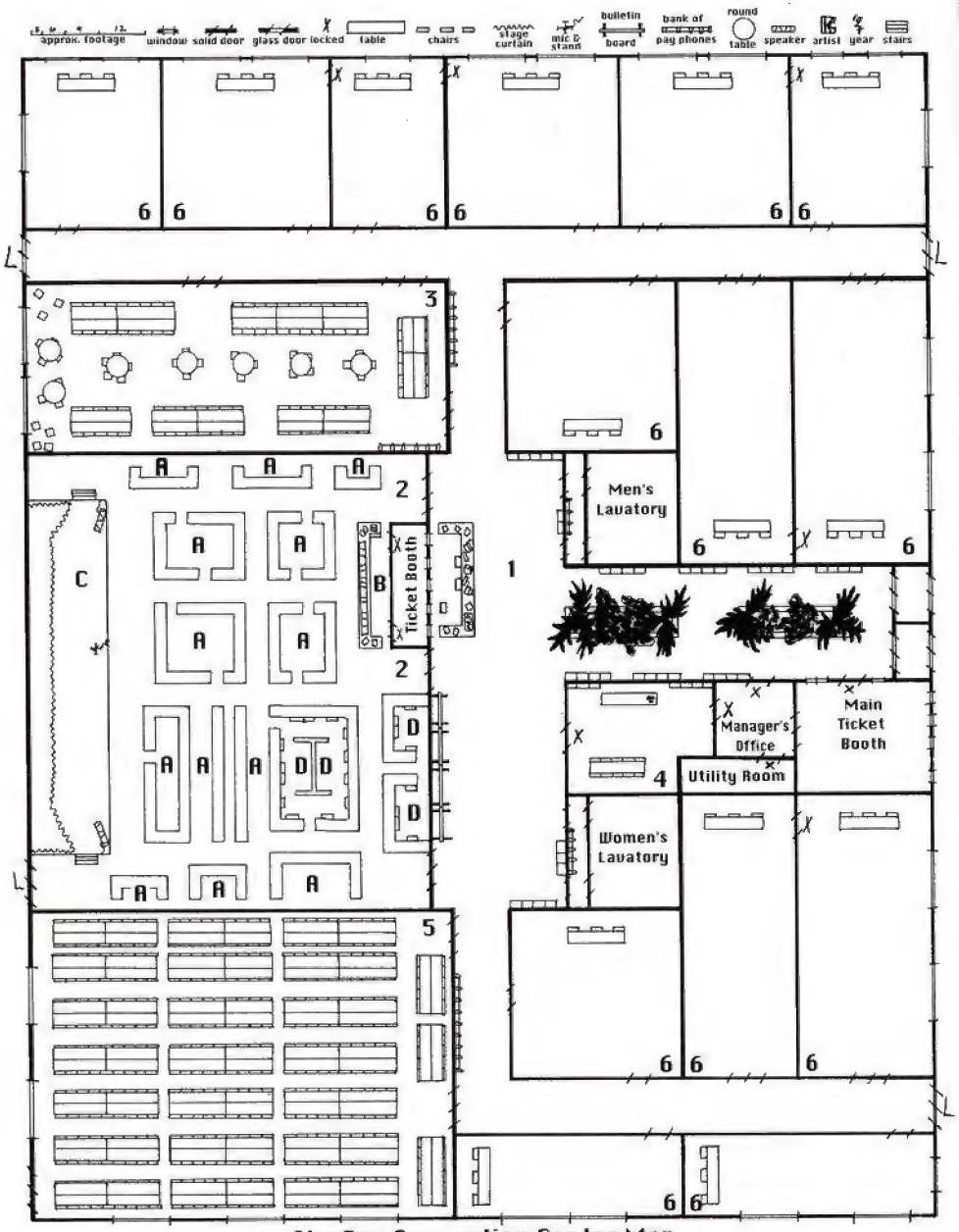


StarCon Convention Center Map

Hi and welcome back to StarCon, the biggest science fiction/gaming convention in the Tri-City area! We've got an exciting line-up of events, artist signings and only the best in collectable merchandise available for sale! We hope you enjoy the weekend, and if you have any questions, please don't heistate to contact a StarCon official at the ticket booth.

Convention Badges

Convention badges must be worn at all times. If you lose your badge, you will need to buy a replacement at the registration table. You will need your badge to leave and reenter the convention.

Time Slots

The convention opens at 7:30 AM on Saturday. Everyone is requested to leave the building by midnight (Convention Center regulations). Please pick up your areas by 11:45 PM. Gamemasters are requested to complete their scenarios 5 to 10 minutes before the next slot begins, so that players may get to their next event on time.

7:30 AM - The convention opens.

8:00 AM - Slot A. The Bazaar opens at 9:00 AM

10:00 AM - Slot B.

12:00 PM - Slot C.

2:00 PM - Slot D.

4:00 PM - Slot E. Costume Contest
Show on the stage in the Bazaar.

6:00 PM - Slot F. The Bazaar closes.

8:00 PM - Slot G.

10:00 PM -Slot H. Please clean up your areas by 11:45 PM.

12:00 AM -Convention closes.

Open Gaming Tables

There will be open gaming tables available in the hallway between the conference rooms and the Gaming Hall.

Announcements

There is a bulletin board near the registration table where you can post calls for players and notes for your friends.

The Bazaar

The Bazaar includes dealers, the Con Store, and an art exhibit. It is open from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM. If you are interested in renting a dealer table or space in the art exhibit (very reasonable rates!), please contact the convention staff.

At 4:00 PM, the Charity Costume Contest Show will be held on the stage.

Con Store

This year there will be a convention store. If you have games you would like to sell, please contact the convention staff before you attend. There is seller fee of $1 plus 10 cents per game. There is no limit on the number of games you may sell. Games in the Con Store that have not been sold should be picked up. Any game not picked up by 10:30 PM will be donated.

Computer Games

The Computer Haus will have computer games to play at their booth in the Bazaar. Try your hand against a human opponent in one of their interactive games (titles to be announced at the convention). Games will run every half hour. The winner of each game will have his or her name put in a drawing to win that game. You will need to sign up at the dealer table. Winners will be contacted the following week.

Our Main Event! Charity Costume Contest

One of the features of the convention is a costume contest, with the registration fee going to a local children's fund. You must preregister for this contest; the cost is $2. Please check in to the convention no later than 10:00 AM, so that the judges will know who to look for. When you arrive at the convention, you will be given a large number. Be sure to prominently display this. Judges will be wandering around the Bazaar and open gaming area, approaching those who are in costume and with numbers. They will be out between 11:00 AM and 3:00 PM. If you've signed up for the contest, be sure to be in the Bazaar some time between those hours. Costumes will be judged based on creativity, excellence of construction, and quality of the persona associated with the costume. Contestants are asked to then return at 4:00 PM to the stage in the Bazaar. You will be asked to give a brief explanation (no more than two minutes) of your costume and persona at the show. Contestants need to be present at the show to win.

Please remember that no weapons or weapon replicas of any kind are allowed at the convention. Let's keep it safe. We also ask that you exercise good taste in both the costume you choose to wear and the persona you choose to present.

The prize is a $20 gift certificate to Deen's Trains and Games (one of our sponsors) and a copy of their catalog, for those of you from out of town who would like to participate.

The Games

Techno Trains / B-23

Nick Weber **Experience:** Novice

Prof. Weber just got a new board game — and he's inviting you try it out. Expand your railway system while taking over or sabotaging your opponents' lines. Rules will be taught.

Getting to the Job on Time / C-12

Erika Schaker **Experience:** Intermediate

Who knew work could be this… um… fun? The Computer says you'll love this *Paranoia* game.

Flights of Fancy / E-18

Sean Geraghty **Experience:** Intermediate

Find out who's got the best ship in the Consortium. The *Starfleet Battles* system with miniatures.

75 Rooms of Wonder / F-10

Tomasa Francis **Experience:** Novice

A fantasy game created with home brewed rules. Can you make it out alive and sane? Rules taught. No wizards allowed.

Dinner Mints / G-20

Brian Sedeni **Experience:** Intermediate

The local lord's invited you over for dinner. You know it's not wise to shirk that. For *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*

The Dead of the Night / H-5

Bob Ronko **Experience:** Novice

Someone's carving up the Undead in Selastos. Your prince has ordered you to put a stop to it. A *Vampire: the Masquerade* scenario.

The Seminars

Gaming Gossip / A-1

Charles Kent, StarCon Coordinator **Experience:** Novice

Get a start on the convention with industry news. Hear what Charlie has learned, and share your thoughts.

Are We Alone? / D-2

Peter Schofer and Margaret Zhang **Experience:** Intermediate

Dr. Schofer is a physics professor and Dr. Zhang teaches biology. They'll explore various theories concerning life on other planets - and if that life has visited Earth. An understanding of basic scientific terms is recommended.

Map Key

1. Main Entrance
2. The Bazaar
   - (A) Dealer tables.
   - (B) The Con Store
   - (C) The stage
   - (D) Art Exhibit
3. Open gaming area
4. Office
5. The Gaming Hall
6. Conference Rooms

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

HOW TO RUN AN underground™ CAMPAIGN IN YOUR HOME TOWN

by Spike Y Jones

Artwork by Greg Smith

Sometimes an apocalypse comes quickly, like a nuclear exchange or an alien invasion, but other times it's so gradual that you may not realize that it's happened even if you're living in the middle of its wreckage. The U.S.A. (heck, the whole *world*) of Mayfair Games' *Underground RPG* is in just such a state of post-decline.

There are three published cities in which one can set an official *Underground* campaign: Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Luna (the only city on the moon). But even with the contents of a boxed set or sourcebook, it can be difficult for a GM to run a credible campaign in a city he's never seen — especially if some of the players have firsthand experience with L.A. or D.C. (Those with firsthand experience with the surface of the moon are the subject of another article).

How can your players know whether a particular strange person, place, or event is anomalous in that far-off city? Is the urban blight in parts of L.A. a sign of horrible future economic collapse? Are the gangs running rampant in Hollywood a new horror, or just the same hoods that made household names of Compton and South Central in the 1990s? If you don't have a solid grasp of the current situation in the city ("just what parts of L.A. are safe, and which are gang-infested, in 1997?"), how can you or your players be expected to comprehend, or even notice, the effects more than two decades of slow destruction will have on the city in which your *Underground* campaign is set? To make a believable and easy-to-run near-future campaign city, the GM should stick with what he knows best; instead of using some unfamiliar pre-packaged city, he can "modernize" his own home city up to the year 2021.

What Can Be Salvaged?

At the level of fist-to-face combat, much of the material in the *Street Tell Stories L.A.*-based boxed set, or other *Underground* books, can be easily transplanted to another setting — such as Baltimore, where I live, or Toronto, where I was born. In 2021, there's not much to distinguish an L.A. street gang from a Baltimore or Toronto gang except that while the L.A. gangwars feature Hispanics fighting African-Americans, Baltimore has African-Americans fighting each other, and Toronto suffers from blacks of Caribbean-descent shooting it out with Asian gangs. The 20mm *Urban Nightmare* #822s are all pretty much the same.

Published characters and buildings can be easily carried over with only minimal changes to names and histories. Events in the *Underground* future-history, such as the Los Angeles Police Strike of 2017 can be easily converted to another locale, but the GM must be careful not to make everything important in *Underground*'s background take place in Baltimore: the first Boosted Pride march in should still be set in D.C., and while the assassination of President Milkovich didn't *have* to happen in Seattle, there's no good reason for the GM to move it out of that city (unless, say, he's setting his campaign in Seattle and doesn't want the assassination to be a significant local event).

What Has To Be Changed?

From a geographic perspective, it's tough to convince a group of local players that the campaign is set in Baltimore when all the events take place around Washington's landmarks, or on streets with L.A.'s unfamiliar names. So the first step in "personalizing" the campaign is gettins a map of the city and the surrounding area. It doesn't have to be a state-of-the-art book map, but the more recent, the better.

The first thing to look for on the map are things that make Baltimore distinct from L.A. or D.C. The city's logo features Baltimore's Washington Monument (smaller than D.C.'s, but the first erected in the country), which could have been distinctively defaced as part of a larger-than-life advertising display for a major condom company. In the 1990s, Baltimore's proudest new constructions are the side-by-side stadiums for the Orioles and the Ravens, which the GM could designate as the sites of a squatter's warren and a permanent flea market respectively.

Some spectacular new constructions (possibly employing advanced alien technology) would have been built; the GM should pick a block of the downtown core which doesn't currently have anything interesting built on it and mark that as the site of a new super-skyscraper

with unique architecture, such as the Estro-Gin building with its carefully crafted naked-woman lines. (A more cynical GM would place the building on a site that does have something interesting on it, such as forcing the Babe Ruth Museum currently housed in his downtown Baltimore childhood home to be reconstructed in the suburbs — probably out of plastic and with little resemblance to the original. Heck, the reconstruction would probably be shaped like a baseball bat, with the woodshed in the form of a baseball.)

Conversely, some landmarks just won't exist anymore, having fallen victim to the rise in terrorism since the Supreme Court ruled that some terrorist actions could be considered Constitutionally-protected Free Speech. In my future Baltimore, the National Shrine at Fort McHenry (the 1814 bombardment of which led Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner") was destroyed in 2014 by a boosted vet calling herself the Scar-Strangled Blammer (see *Ways & Means*, noting that this version of the NPC described there would have worked her way into local or state politics, instead of federal politics as in the published version). She riddled a reviewing stand full of dignitaries and politicians with automatic-weapons fire before demolishing all the historic buildings with a flurry of her own "rockets' red glare", providing a spectacular close to the site's bicentennial celebrations. (This bloodbath, incidentally, was not considered Free Speech, not because the Banger failed to acquire a terrorism license before acting, but because the target of her destruction was the property of American citizens and not a sovereign corporation.)

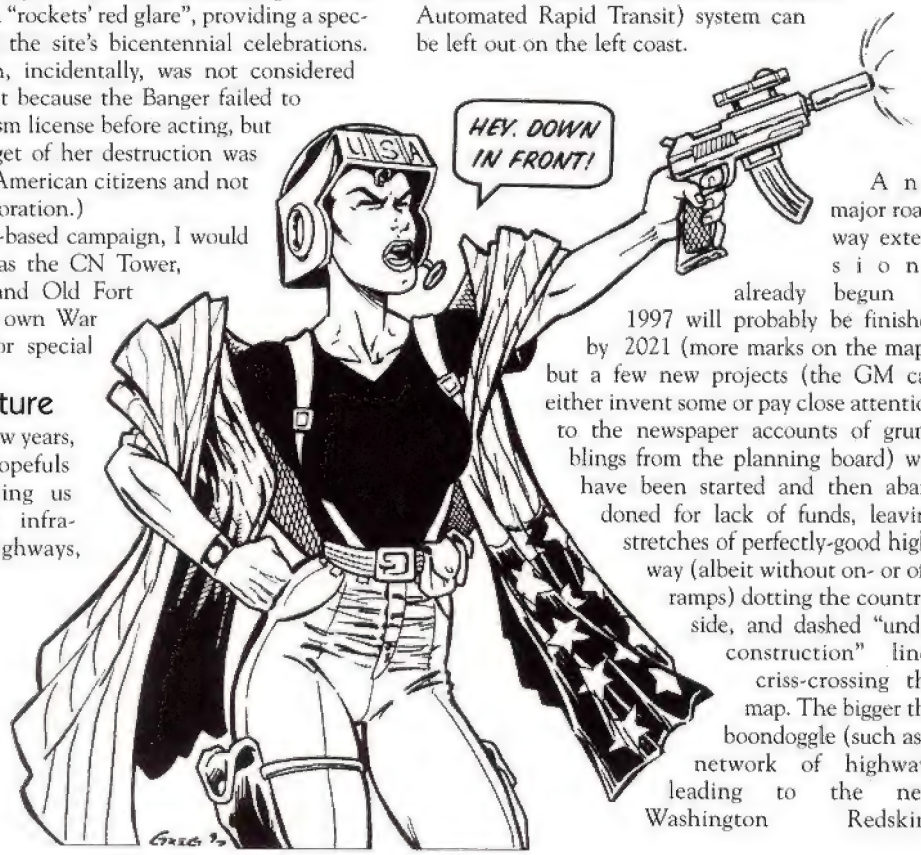
The National Shrine at Fort McHenry was destroyed by a boosted vet calling herself the Scar-Strangled Blammer. She riddled the reviewing stand with automatic weapons before demolishing all historical buildings with a flurry of her own 'rockets' red glare."

In a Toronto-based campaign, I would pick sites such as the CN Tower, the Skydome, and Old Fort York (Toronto's own War of 1812 site) for special attention.

Infrastructure

For the last few years, presidential hopefuls have been telling us that America's infrastructure (highways, bridges, railways etc.) needs to be overhauled or else it will crumble out from under us. Unfortunately, for all the promises that are made during election years, there never seems to be enough money to complete the necessary repairs and improvements. In the future, the dynamic interplay between the need to expand and the decay that a lack of money and political will causes will be more evident than ever.

The physical presence of the map in front of you makes tracking this process easy. For instance, both Toronto and Baltimore have mass-transit systems featuring subway lines (with a wide variance in quality and utility). After more than two decades, it can be assumed that each system would have one or two new stations tacked onto the end of existing lines which can easily be drawn on the map. On the other hand, the current decline in service is sure to continue, so Toronto's subway would be prohibitively expensive to use (and thus, likely poorly maintained) while Baltimore would have closed off a number of stations in unsafe areas (so that the system can effectively transport a rider from one side of the city to the other, but with no stops in the city's core). Despite this inefficiency, both cities lack the incentive L.A. had to come up with a new rapid transit system from scratch in 2013, so LA's D.A.R.T. (Distributed Automated Rapid Transit) system can be left out on the left coast.



Any major roadway extensions already begun in 1997 will probably be finished by 2021 (more marks on the map), but a few new projects (the GM can either invent some or pay close attention to the newspaper accounts of grumblings from the planning board) will have been started and then abandoned for lack of funds, leaving stretches of perfectly-good highway (albeit without on- or off-ramps) dotting the countryside, and dashed "under construction" lines criss-crossing the map. The bigger the boondoggle (such as a network of highways leading to the new Washington Redskins

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terrorized the good citizens of your town,
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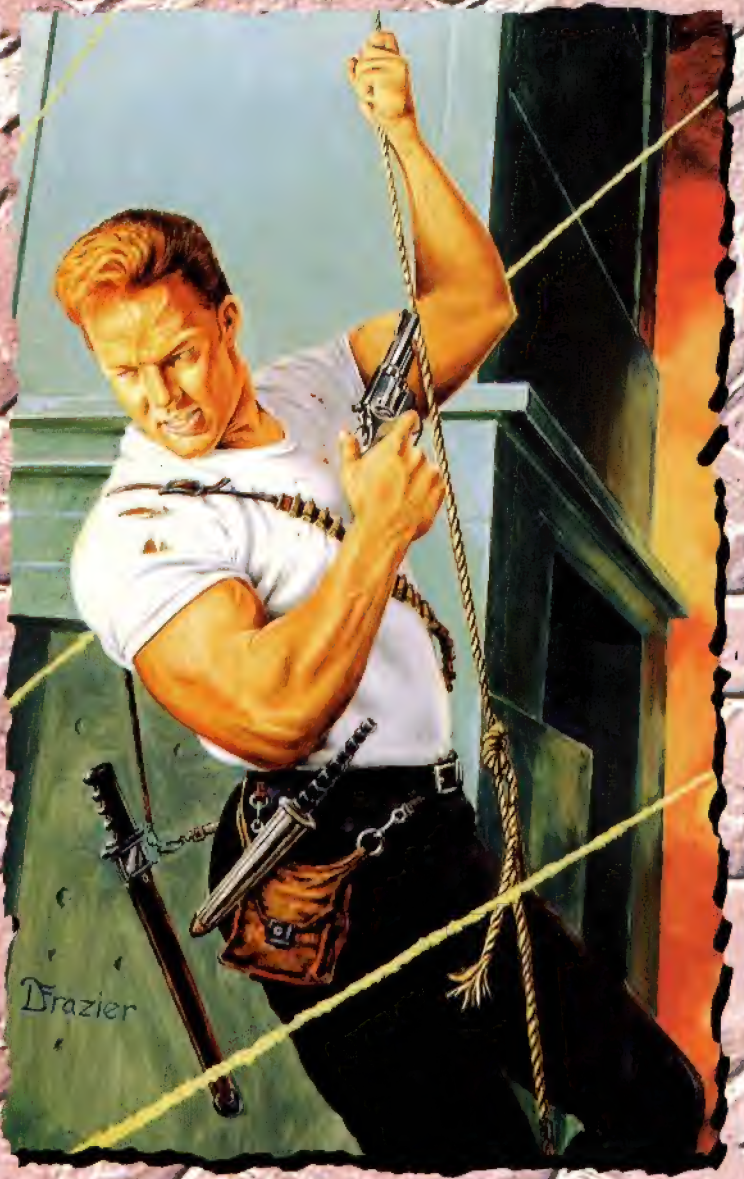

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Stadium in Laurel, just south of Baltimore, all left incomplete when the Redskins moved back down to D.C. in 1999), the more likely the players will be to get the joke.

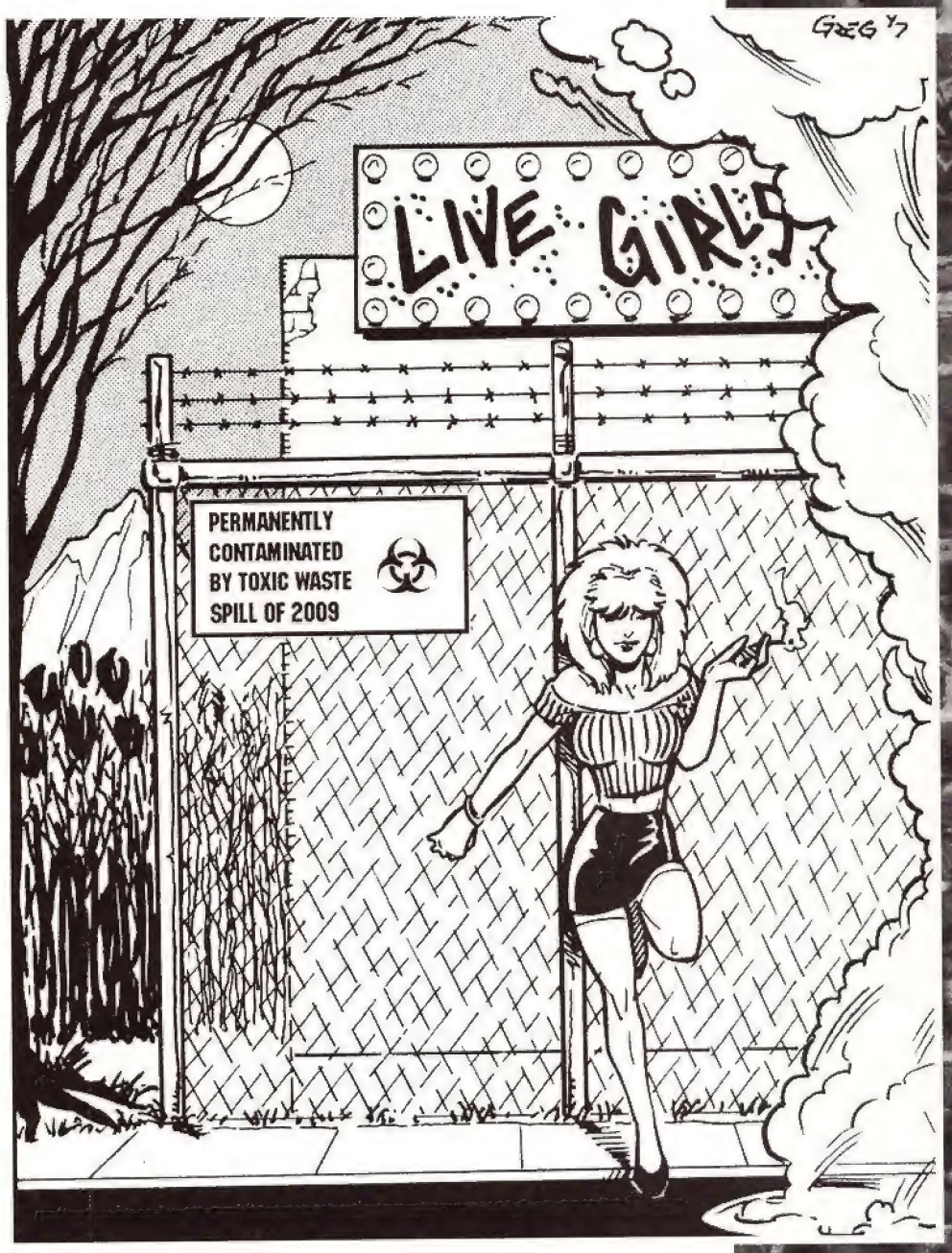
Urban Decay – Urban Renewal

One thing that makes a city seem almost alive is the fact that it's in a state of constant change. Cities grow, shrink, improve, decline, die, and are revitalized. So despite the dystopic feel of much of *Underground* and this article, not everything in a future Baltimore will have fallen apart; if some things don't improve over the next three decades, there won't be a Baltimore to speak of in 2021!

Using the map, the GM can easily mark areas that have decayed significantly, possibly shading a small central portion of a bad region to show where civilization has completely collapsed. A neighborhood which is considered unsafe in 1997 might be a black hole on the map in 2021 — a few square blocks with no running water, no electricity, no fast food stores, and which no police cars, ambulances, or taxis will enter.

But at the same time as he blights sections of the city's downtown core, the GM must remember to create new neighborhoods to replace those blotted out. He should look at the map (or the real estate ads in the newspaper) and identify where the ritziest new suburban housing developments are being erected. In most cases, these developments will be in otherwise rural surroundings, such as a road leading far off into the countryside. On the 2021 version of the map, two decades of urban sprawl will have surrounded these isolated developments with a thick carpet of almost identical townhouse complexes and blocks of tract housing. The new prized real estate will be in either walled and gated planned communities even more isolated than those in the 1990s (figure moving them five or ten miles further out than the current newest suburbs for every decade of intervening time), or on anti-gravity platforms delicately poised above the less-fortunate subsprawl closer to downtown (the Upper Eel Aire enclave from the *Underground Notebook* can be used as a template. Deleting the terminal "e" and placing it over Baltimore's own Eel Air community makes a nice touch).

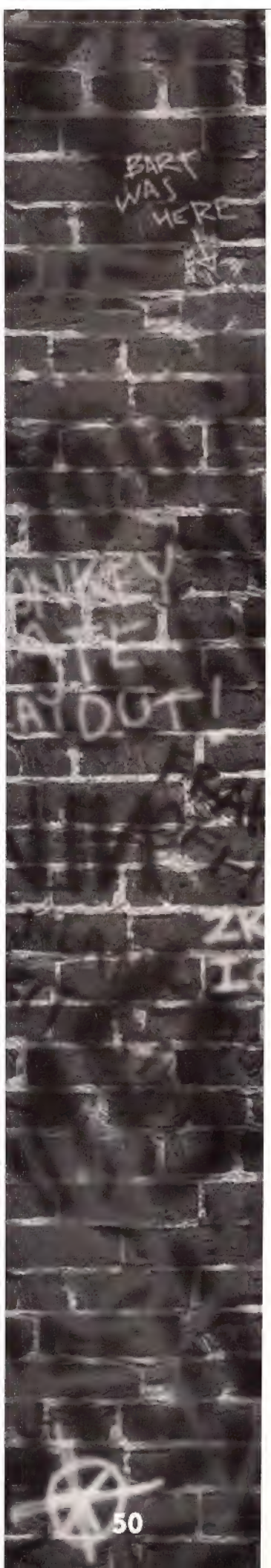
Similarly, new industrial and commercial zones should be drawn in to replace those current ones that are marked "permanently contaminated by toxic waste spills circa 2009" or whatever. The new industrial developments don't have to be any cleaner or safer than those making a profit nowadays and the commercial zones will include as many unsavory businesses (such as the strip joints catering to boosted veterans and slow-witted pre-frontals alongside the current sleazy dives in Baltimore's "Block") as it does outlets for futuristic high-tech entertainment equipment.



The Name Game

Another thing which can be used to show the change in time between the present and the game's future, while also binding your campaign setting more tightly to the chosen city, is the use of recognizable names in unfamiliar situations. For instance, public buildings such as airports, courthouses, or recreational facilities are often named after famous people (or completely unknown people who donated lots of money to the re-election campaign of the mayor or governor that year). Sometimes these are even renamed when one famous person is forgotten, to be replaced by a more recent *cause celebre*.

So if the PC heroes ever find themselves in court, make a point of them seeing the name of the courthouse on their way in: in Baltimore, they'd visit the Billy Murphy Memorial Courthouse, named after a grandstanding (and often ridiculed) defense attorney of the 1980s and '90s. Whenever the GM is in doubt



about the name of a public building, he should name them all by default after the same famous politician: Baltimore's popular multi-term mayor Kurt Schmoke's name would be found on dozens, if not hundreds, of buildings throughout the city.

A recurring motif in *Underground* is to have the major politicians of the future be minor celebrities of the present, especially ones who would be ill-suited to holding high office. With disgraced ex-L.A. police chief Darryl Gates becoming a two-term president (along with VP Rush Limbaugh), on a local level it would be surprising if the governor of the state of Maryland wasn't someone like TV weatherman and part-time carnival clown Marty Bass, while the mayor of Baltimore could just possibly still be Kurt Schmoke, after only a little more than three decades in office. (Alternatively, people could still be talking about The Great Schmoke Scandal — whatever it was — years after it occurred.)

With disgraced ex-LA. police chief Darryl Gates becoming a two-term president (along with VP Rush Limbaugh), on a local level it would be surprising if the governor of Maryland wasn't someone like TV weatherman and part-time carnival clown Marty Bass.

The name chosen for the office isn't important, and the GM doesn't have to rationalize how a mere weatherman gets elected to the governorship; he just has to throw them out as non-sequiturs (remembering to record them so that he won't accidentally replace Governor Bass with the winner of the 1997 Miss Baltimore pageant).

While on the topic of names, boosted soldiers from any particular city are likely to give themselves codenames related to that city. Thus, some L.A.-based vets name themselves in parody of Hollywood television and movie titles and characters (*e.g.*, Captain Video), while politics and the federal government provide names for Washington-based vets (*e.g.*, The Gettysburg Redresser or Line-item Veto).

At least one (if not a dozen or more) Baltimore-based boosted veteran would *have* to be named after the region's single most-promoted symbol: steamed crabs (with more than a few of the names decidedly off-color). Toronto's boosts would have a bit more trouble trying to find a single unifying theme to identify the city, but its trademark cultural variety could result in names like the Asian Avenger, Super Sikh, Captain Diversity, and the WASP.

Home Turf

Aside from the cosmetic changes needed to transform L.A. into your own city, the most important sites to look into are those the PCs will become most intimately acquainted with: where they live, work, have fun, and get in trouble.

With the exception of the rare non-boosted PC (or PCs boosted by non-standard organizations, such as the Treasury Department or the CIA), all player characters have some sort of military background, receiving their powers, training, experience, and traumas at the hands of some conflict firm. Thus, having Allied Mayhem, Trans-World Devastation or whatever facilities nearby can be a major boon to the campaign. A built-in connection between all the varied PCs, and a continuing source of NPCs, resources, and plot-hooks. And assuming the current military budget-cutting continues unabated into the next century, there's no need for the GM to design a new military complex for the mercenary companies; just pick a convenient local base and declare it privatized.

In the case of Baltimore, there's a wide array of bases to choose from, each with its own merits. For example, the Air National Guard wing based at Glenn L. Martin State Airport could be replaced by the TWD 11th Airmobile (which would make the Baltimore-Washington corridor the home of the criminal empire of 11th-veteran Santa Claws, described in the *Underground Notebook*) with the rival DHI Pathfinders Rapid Deployment Force stationed at what used to be the Patuxent Naval Air Test Center sixty miles down the Chesapeake Bay. The Aberdeen Proving Grounds would be a great choice for a base closing due to recent sex scandals and earlier chemical weapons connections (there are lots of plot possibilities there), but, as its name implies, it could still be a center for exotic weapons testing (there are those plot possibilities again).

With a campaign centered on activities after the PCs have demobilized, the large Veteran's Administration hospital complex at Fort Howard (which is also a historic site dating back to the War of 1812) is a site tailor-made for *Underground*. It has a ready link to the most important government offices most PCs will ever have dealings with, its location is isolated from the heart of Baltimore (situated on a spit of land in Chesapeake Bay with only a few roads leading to it), it's already a complex of neglected old buildings (meaning it'll be ready to collapse when a collection of muscle-bound psychotics begins treatment there), and it's near enough to some heavy industry (a steel foundry and shipyard) to provide great combat locales and a host of low-pay, high-risk jobs for veterans lucky enough not to be stuck with the lower-pay/higher-risk jobs at the local 7-11.

To make the VA hospital over as a "modern" facility takes little work: a few buildings should have been demolished, some ugly new BrixBlox buildings have been cheaply erected to replace them, and the neighborhood surrounding the compound becomes almost deserted, with the "For Sale" signs long turned into fireplace ashes and the few squatters living in fear of their boosted neighbors. (The generic "Veterans Administration Medical Center" from the *Underground Notebook* can be used as a template for the Fort Howard VA hospital if the GM doesn't want to actually look up a detailed map of the real hospital

grounds.)

To add a touch of depressing verisimilitude, the GM can make mention of the "Fort Howard Tunnel", a special access route designed to supply and provide access to the hospital — thus reducing the risks that the surrounding civilians will have to deal with. Of course, after the GM mentions the tunnel project, he should point out that, while approved, construction hasn't actually started yet because of a lack of promised government funding. And with the vets located in the Bay, close to major shipping lanes, the rusting hulk of a tanker that suffered the wrath of a particularly violent anti-oil-interests vet would make a nice conversation piece a couple hundred yards offshore, with the devastated shoreline surrounding the hospital testament to the reduced funding for oil-spill cleanups in the 2020s.

Those wanting better medical care than Fort Howard can turn to Baltimore's famous medical research facility, Johns Hopkins. Unfortunately, because of increasingly violent thefts of pharmaceuticals and expensive medical machinery, the hospital was the first complex of buildings in the city to be raised onto an anti-gravity platform above its old site, and the anti-intruder missile-system is quite firm about turning away patients without paid-up medical insurance policies and appointments.

The More Things Change, The More Things Should Stay The Same

The premise of this article was to translate the strange setting of an *Underground* campaign to the familiar location of the play-group's home city. But if the GM sees too far in the changes he makes to the current city in order to create his future city, the entire effort is wasted; a completely rewritten post-holocaust Baltimore can be just as unfamiliar as a post-holocaust L.A. or D.C.

The GM has to remember that anything that he doesn't intentionally modify in some way to illustrate a point is probably going to remain much the same in 2021 as it is in 1997. A bit dingier or recently renovated of course, but still basically the same structure.

So, when the PCs are hired to secretly shepherd a truck full of high-explosives across town, there isn't going to be a newly-built, terrorist- and criminal-proof hazardous materials tunnel available for their use; the vets have to drive the truck on the same familiar potholed streets that the players themselves use to drive to work or to a downtown concert. Yes, the activities on those streets will be different (unless your home city is one in wich heavily-armed hijacking attempts are currently commonplace), but the contrast between the familiar and the strange will be more striking if the new elements play on an easily recognizable land thus, non-distracting) backdrop.

It seems strange to say about a setting as exaggerated as *Underground*, but the key words to use when "futurizing" a city like Baltimore or Toronto into the 21st century are "restraint... in moderation".

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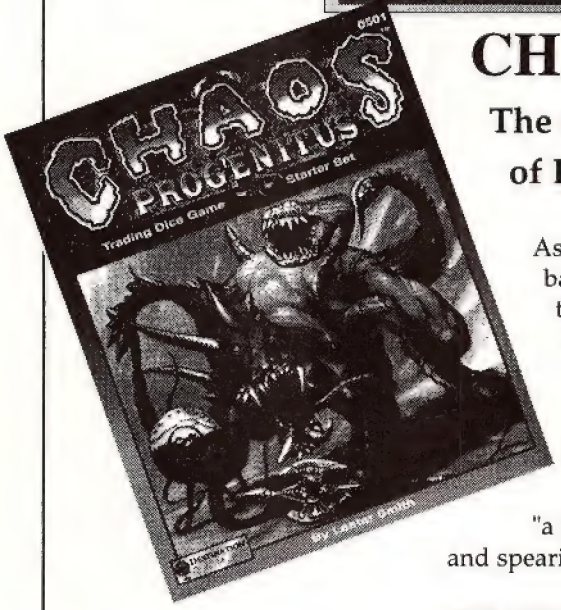

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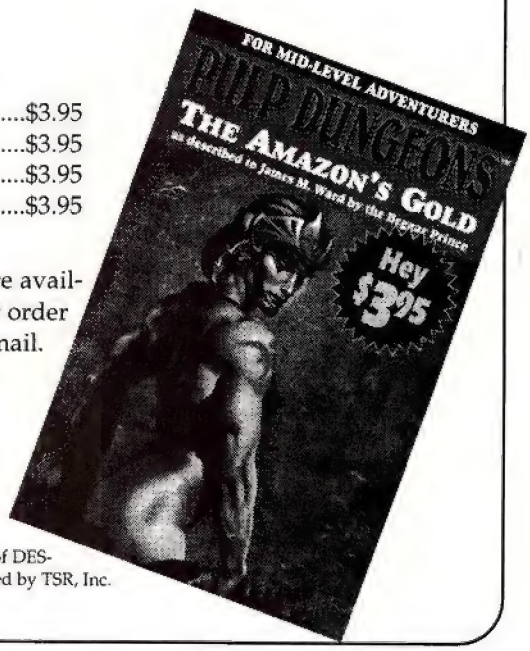

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Even If It Ain't Broke, You Gotta Fix It

150 Reasons for PCs to Hold Onto The Receipts

By Larry Granato

Artwork by Zander Cannon

The devices, magic items, weapons, vehicles, and equipment player characters utilize are an important element in role-playing games. It is often taken for granted that such objects perform exactly as advertised, over and over again. Yet, as anyone can tell you, nothing is ever quite as good as it's cracked up to be. And time and toil do not improve the situation.

Most things have hidden flaws that only appear after they have been in use for a while. In a few cases, the defect is major and readily apparent. When a device is new — either a fresh invention or recent import — unknown weaknesses are more common than not. Unfortunately, the only way a PC can find out about them is the hard way.

Characters probably spend their free time maintaining their equipment. However, defective devices are more troublesome than routine maintenance can overcome. The imperfections are inherent, and cannot be easily fixed, if at all. They may malfunction during an adventure despite the best care. Even sound devices are not immune to problems. Abuse, age, accidents, or hard use can cause an item to develop faults, particularly minor ones.

For example, a PC in a science fiction game goes into a weapons shop on an alien planet far from home. The sidearms on display appear to be similar to the "standard" ones he's seen before, so he pays the usual price for a ray gun. Only when he actually uses it will he find that it's an inferior but passable imitation, and has several defects.

The same goes for just about any item in any type of role-playing campaign. Very simple pieces of equipment are less likely to have problems than complex gear, but even a rudimentary implement can have a flaw. Sometimes imperfections are intrinsic in the design, and nothing can be done about it. Shoddy materials or poor craftsmanship contribute to many deficiencies. A few items might have even been sabotaged during manufacture. Others are damaged before they are sold. The seller normally tries to hide or minimize any flaws the object might have, if he even knows about them. With respectable businesses, the PC may have the option of returning or exchanging defective devices, but forget that when buying from street dealers or the underworld. Illicit or cut-rate suppliers are much more likely to furnish substandard gear as well. This especially applies to "used," "close-out," "seconds," "showroom," "overstock," and "discount" merchandise.

A character can examine a prospective purchase carefully for defects. However, unless he's heard about a problem with that particular product or is an expert in the field, he will be unlikely to expose any imperfections. The manufacturer may be able to remedy difficulties, but they may be far away or no longer in business. In any event, this takes a lot of time and aggravation, not to mention shipping charges.

"Bargains" or "special buys" are low quality items. They're cheap, but invariably have one or more major and several minor defects. No returns is the usual policy. Articles which are "standard" are of minimum acceptable quality. They always have one or more minor defects, and occasionally a major one. "Super," "premium" or "extra" denote things of above average worth. They may have a minor defect, and cost 25-75% more. Very high quality objects cost are lot more (100-200%), but usually don't have any faults.

Any of the listed defects may be major or minor; it is a matter of degree. The gamemaster should judge the severity of a problem with a minor defect to be much less than that of a major one. For example, an unstable vehicle with a minor defect may have the hood pop open at high speed. If the defect's major, the engine could fall out.

Alternatively, minor defects only cause trouble once in a while, while there is a very good chance that a major defect will take effect at an inopportune time. In all cases, the defect is considered to be in addition to the normal properties of the item. The normal functioning means the item will do basically what it's supposed to, as modified by defects and usage.

The tables below list possible defects that may be found in equipment. They are given in a generic format suitable for any types of RPGs. The GM should select the best choice for the item in question: not all are appropriate.

Table I is for hand-held, unpowered melee weapons. Even such simple objects may have problems.

Table II, Missile Weapons, is mainly for guns or energy weapons, but some of the defects are applicable

to bows or crossbows.

Table III applies to unpowered armor of various types.

Table IV, Animals, lists problems that may occur with pets, riding creatures, non-sentient alien critters, beasts of burden, and livestock. Of course, animals are not defective, but have individual temperaments and idiosyncrasies that must be dealt with.

Table V is for vehicles, anything from model T's to spaceships. It is generally geared towards the smaller forms of personal transportation.

Table VI is for all kinds of miscellaneous equipment, anything from geiger counters to radios.

Table VII is for various magic items that have powers beyond simple bonuses. Magic items are normally described as being made of the highest quality material available. They are also said to be more difficult to damage or destroy than normal objects. While this may be true to some extent, it would lead to the phenomenon of magic items increasing in number as time went on, since they're so hard to get rid of.

Since this isn't a desirable situation from the GM's point of view, consider that some lower quality objects happen to get through the enchantment process. There may have also been borderline items that were just barely good enough to be enchanted. Enchantments that fail by the slightest margin may produce items which are subpar, but not useless. Of the usual high quality articles, some number may have seen such abuse or are so old that they have developed problems. Some "cursed" items may only be slightly affected.

It stands to reason, then, that a significant fraction of magic items could have defects, usually minor. These would not be enough to make thing totally cursed, just annoyingly defective.

Finally, Table VIII, Food and Drink, is something characters consume in considerable quantities. Generally, they don't worry about quality, but here are some reasons to.

When all is said and done, a few words of wisdom to PC consumers and users: let the buyer beware.

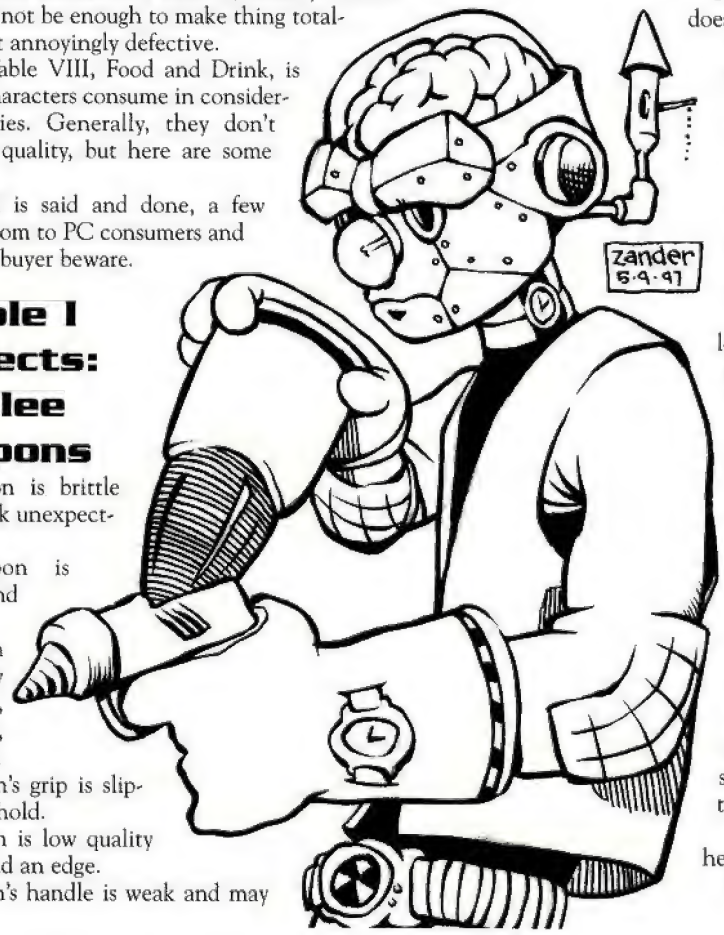


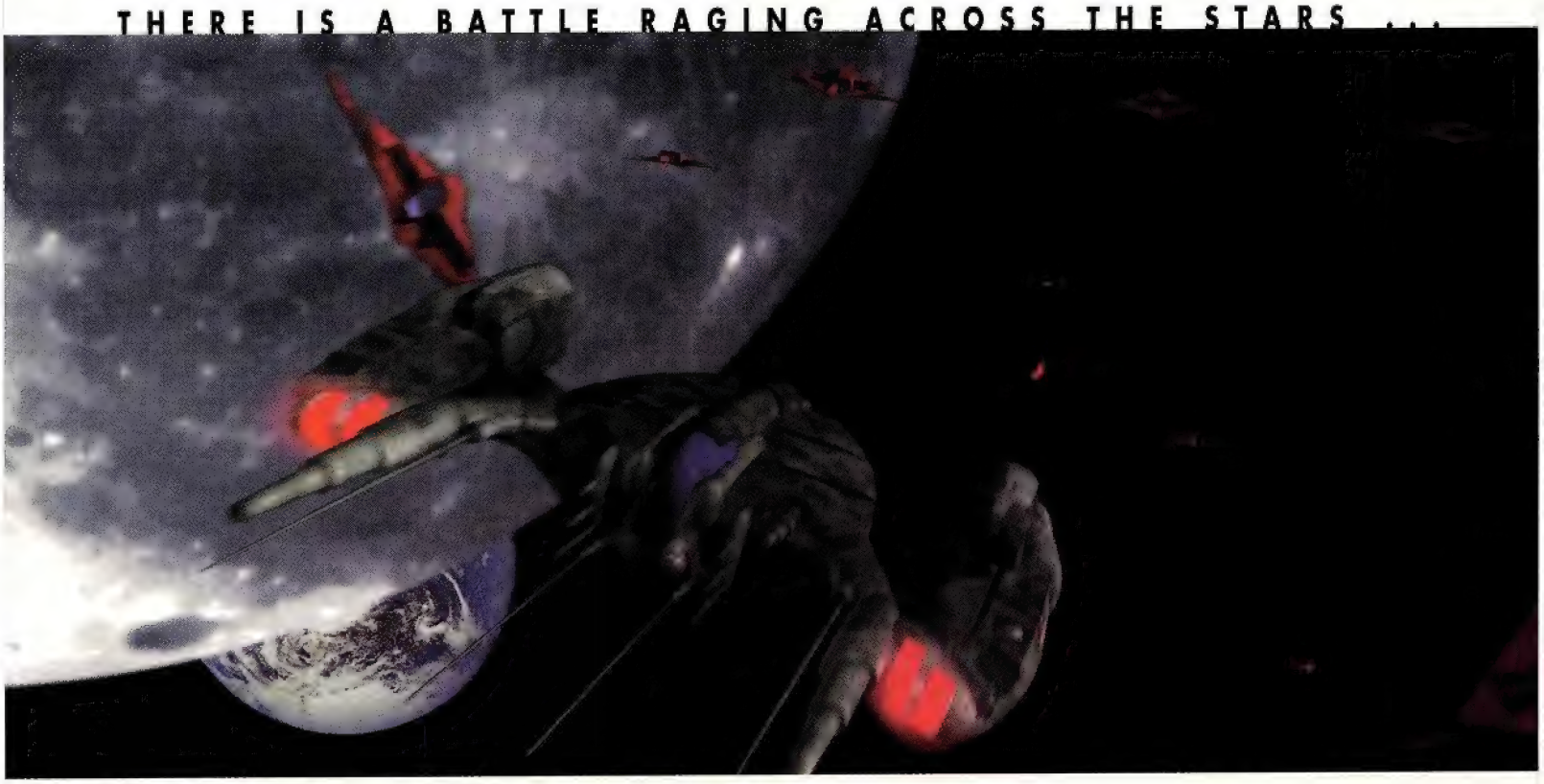
Table I Defects: Melee Weapons

1. Weapon is brittle and may break unexpectedly.
2. Weapon is badly made and may warp.
3. Weapon is poorly designed, unbalanced, and unwieldy.
4. Weapon's grip is slippery, hard to hold.
5. Weapon is low quality and won't hold an edge.
6. Weapon's handle is weak and may crack, splinter, or break off.
7. Weapon has useless ornamentation that detracts from its combat effectiveness. Otherwise, it is designed badly, and less damaging in combat than it should be.
8. Weapon is noisy; clanks, creaks, scrapes scabbard, whistles when swung.
9. Weapon is made of inferior materials and will crack, split, shiver, nick, or chip.
10. Weapon tends to rust or decay rapidly.

Table II Defects: Missile Weapons

1. Weapon jams, fails to load/extract, becomes unstrung, or shorts out — will not fire until cleared or fixed. Bowstring may break.
2. Weapon is inaccurate/has misaligned sights; typically -10% at short range, -20% to -50% at medium, can't hit anything at long range.
3. Weapon is extremely delicate and must be repaired after rough handling or prolonged use.
4. Ammo is faulty, breaks, or is a dud.
5. Weapon tends to overheat or get bent out of shape and must cool off after prolonged use. Otherwise, ammo may "cook off."
6. Weapon is poorly designed and is difficult/slow to reload.
7. Weapon is poorly made and easy to damage.
8. Weapon hangs fire, misfires, or fails to fire.
9. Weapon is defective/ has a preexisting flaw and may suddenly break/explode.
10. Weapon will not function if it gets dirty or wet; may be under- or over-lubricated.
11. Weapon's safety device does not work properly.
12. Weapon is easy to accidentally discharge.
13. Ammo is substandard; damage or penetration reduced 20-50%.
14. Weapon functions poorly or not at all under very hot/cold/humid/arid temperatures.
15. Weapon becomes less effective with each shot (e.g., leading) until cleaned or recalibrated; -10% cumulative chance to hit.
16. Rapid fire almost always causes jams, shorts, excessive vibration which reduces accuracy, etc.
17. Weapon has annoyingly powerful recoil; belches smoke and flame.
18. Weapon is overly complex and needs constant cleaning/repair/tuning.
19. Weapon is bulky, heavy, and clumsy to use.
20. Weapon is finicky

THERE IS A BATTLE RAGING ACROSS THE STARS . . .



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about ammunition, and won't accept most standard types, even of the correct size/caliber.

Table III Defects: Armor/Helmets

1. Armor is misshapen, doesn't fit right.
2. Armor has weak spot, very little protection there.
3. Armor has gaps, or doesn't provide coverage where it should. Alternatively, it doesn't give the level of protection it should.
4. Armor's straps are poor, they may break/slip, or helmet may be knocked around.
5. Armor is very tight/bulky, lowers dexterity and movement.
6. Armor is stifling, builds up heat, exhausts wearer. Otherwise the helmet has poor visibility, restricts breathing.
7. Armor chafes, itches, causes rashes.
8. Armor clanks, squeaks, rattles, clangs.
9. Armor is especially difficult to take on or off.
10. Armor is difficult to repair.

Table IV Defects: Animals

1. Animal is sulky, lazy, moves slowly, or wanders off when it's wanted for work.
2. Animal tends to show off, is overly friendly, constantly sniffing at others, rubbing against them,etc.
3. Animal has a bad temper and will try to buck off riders and gear. Attacks others at random: nips, bites, claws, kicks, stomps, shoots quills, etc.
4. Animal digs, burrows, buries items, takes and hides objects, chews on things, shreds stuff, and so on.
5. Animal is poorly disciplined and won't obey commands.
6. Animal is not housebroken, or when outdoors, takes a dump at the most inconvenient times. Alternatively, drinks out of toilets or sewers, or eats repulsive substances.
7. Animal is loud, shrill, yappy, snores, honks, etc.
8. Animal is a affection mooch and always wants petting, hugs, conversation, toys, snacks, entertainment, and so on.
9. Animal is jealous of others; it resents anyone who comes between it and its master.
10. Animal is spoiled and wants to go everywhere people go, have everything they have, and do everything they do.
11. Animal is overly curious and is constantly poking into things.
12. Animal is perpetually hungry and always eating or looking for food; may have weight problem. It eats the wrong types of food, too. Alternatively, the animal is an extremely finicky eater.
13. Animal has a highly unpleasant odor.
14. Animal hates other animals and will attack and try to drive them off.
15. Animal likes to run away. Good jumper/climber, too.
16. Animal is very stupid for its species, and can't be taught to do anything.
17. Animal slobbers, drools, slurps, sheds, spits, loses body parts, heaves up gross stuff, emits nauseat-

ing secretions or sprays offensive liquids.

18. Animal is an avid hunter/scavenger; brings home both live and dead "love offerings" and leaves decaying pieces of prey lying around.

19. Animal is butt-ugly. This doesn't bother the creature, but may draw ridicule towards the PC.

20. Animal causes extreme allergic reactions among those susceptible to such things and produces cold-like symptoms for the rest.

21. Animal has a reoccurring vermin infestation problem, dandruff, the mange, and so on.

22. Animal is high-strung, nervous, erratic, easy to spook, afraid of loud noises/darkness.

23. Animal is nearsighted or partially blind.

24. Animal goes lame after any extensive travel.

25. Animal is deaf or hard of hearing.

26. Animal is clumsy, breaks/knocks things over, steps on objects or people, prone to accidents, rides roughly.

27. Animal is sickly, needs medicine, protection from drafts, etc.

28. Animal is cowardly or oblivious to extreme danger.

29. Animal always manages to get wet, filthy, or cover itself in some foul substance.

30. Animal is extremely stubborn and headstrong.

Table V Defects: Vehicles

1. Vehicle gets lousy mileage; is a real power hog.

2. Vehicle suffers from an extreme lack of maneuverability.

3. Vehicle is a lemon, and breaks down frequently.

4. Vehicle is a "bomb" and has poor acceleration, aside from being highly unattractive.

5. Vehicle cannot stand stress and falls apart under high acceleration or during extreme maneuvers.

6. Vehicle vibrates, rattles, shrieks, whistles, makes strange noises, and is annoyingly loud.

7. Vehicle's instrumentation is faulty, unreliable, and inaccurate.

8. Vehicle's braking/landing systems are... well... inadequate.

9. Vehicle leaks various fluids, coolants, lubricants, and fuel.

10. Vehicle is poorly designed for comfort, bothersome to sit or move around in, difficult to get in and out of; occupants may be locked in or out.

11. Vehicle is easy to steal.

12. Vehicle's driver suffers a lack of visibility.

13. Vehicle is underpowered, and the engine operates irregularly.

14. Vehicle spews pollutants or toxic/radioactive

exhaust. May be illegal.

15. Vehicle is badly designed for repair/maintenance; parts are scarce, and difficult to replace.

16. Vehicle's environmental controls are insufficient. Pray for nice days.

17. Vehicle's body/hull is weak, prone to rupture/dents.

18. Vehicle's storage compartments are too small, awkward to reach, oddly shaped, or provide insufficient protection for contents.

19. Vehicles interior/exterior lighting is deficient.

20. Vehicle's safety systems do not function properly. Security alarm goes off randomly.

21. Vehicle's electrical/energy systems are faulty, tend to short out or operate erratically.

22. Vehicle is a firetrap; may catch on fire or explode under certain conditions.

23. Coolant systems are insufficient; vehicle may overheat (usually at the most inopportune time).

24. Vehicle has been highly modified or is a off-brand and is troublesome to repair.

25. Vehicle is overpowered and dangerously fast.

26. Vehicle's controls are extremely touchy, and it is tricky to handle.

27. Vehicle is not crashworthy; unsafe at any speed.

28. Vehicle's control or primary systems suffer from a hidden major flaw that results in unpredictable and dangerous behavior on rare occasions.

29. Vehicle is a junk heap which suffers a total systems failure from time to time, in addition to normally poor performance.

30. Vehicle has an excess of "chrome", fancy paint, superfluous systems, luxuries, and extras, uhich are easy to break, soak up energy, and impede efficiency.

Table VI Defects: Miscellaneous Equipment

1. Device causes user to sneeze uncontrollably, eyes tear, etc.

2. Devices uses excessive charges or batteries quickly run low.

3. Device is torn, ripped, stained, dented, bent, cracked, battered, peeling, etc.

4. Device is slow to start, balky to operate.

5. Device shorts out, zaps user.

6. Device sparks, smokes, catches on fire, explodes.

7. Device functions erratically at times.

8. Device fails under stress.

9. Device's carrying handles or straps break.

10. Device creaks, squeaks, hisses, beeps, rings, or makes odd noises.

11. Device is bulky, uncomfortable to carry.

12. Device gives inaccurate readings or malfunctions in a subtle manner.

13. Device suffers many break-downs and is problematic to repair.

14. Device causes interference with other equipment operating in the vicinity. Alternatively, device is easily affected by other nearby gear.

15. Device's parts fall off; it wears out quickly.

16. Device is easily affected by environmental conditions, chemicals, magnetism, radiation, gases, etc.

17. Device turns on or off at random.

18. Device is fragile, easy to damage.

19. Device gives off a lot of light, heat, static electricity, radio waves, or energy.

20. Device has sharp edges, or contains dangerous liquids, high pressure gases or other things which may injure a careless user.

Table VII Defects: Magic Items

1. The magic comes and goes (give that wand a couple good raps).

2. The magic is weaker than normal or varies in strength from time to time.

3. The magic is misdirected at times.

4. The magic has a small chance of producing bizarre side effects (water flowing uphill, rain of strange little critters, etc.).

5. The magic has a small chance of producing random results.

6. The magic depends on certain conditions or particular times; operates erratically otherwise.

7. The magical effects are occasionally delayed.

8. The magical effects may affect/rebound on the caster or companions.

9. Magical backfire — Possible destructive effect on caster.

10. The magic makes the user ill.

11. The magic produces unusual visual effects (glows, dancing lights, illusions, etc.), strange and loud noises, or foul stenches.

12. The magic tires out the user.

13. The magic is quickly drained of charges, or needs time to "recharge."

14. The magic requires command words to be shouted, or the activating verbal components are tongue-twisting and lengthy.

15. The magic can only be used a limited number of times per day, or a limited number of times, period.

16. The area, object, or creature affected varies from what was desired.

17. The effective range of the magic changes.

18. The magic temporarily reduces the user's skills, abilities, hits, etc.

19. The magic draws the unwanted attention of beings from great distances.

20. The magic item is delicate and must be carefully protected.

Table VIII Defects: Food and Drink

1. Food is mildly toxic, causing mild illness or allergic reactions.

2. Food is contaminated, causing disease.

3. Food is highly spiced, causing burning sensations in mouth, throat, sinus, stomach.

4. Food contains insects, vermin, animal droppings, and other unhealthy bits of stuff.

5. Food causes stomachache, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, flatulence, or belching.

6. Food contains addictive substances.

7. Food has poor nutritional value.

8. Food tastes lousy.

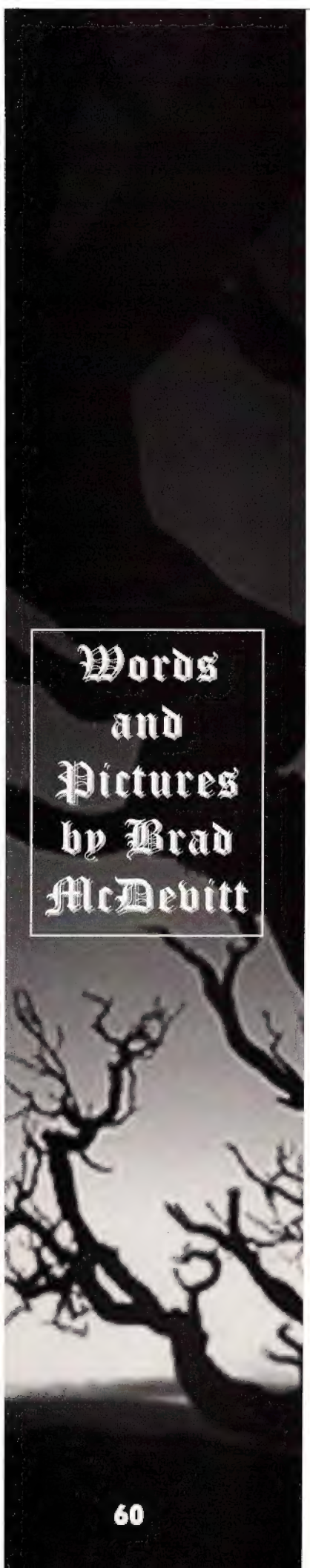
9. Food has spoiled.

10. Food is something other than what the character thinks it is.

Clan Pënangellan

A New Independent Clan for VAMPIRE The Masquerade

Words and Pictures by Brad McDevitt



The Pënangellan are possibly the most horrific of the clans of the Kindred, beside which even the ghastly appearance of the Nosferatu and the Samedhi seem mild (see **Appearance**, below, for details). A Pënangellan is nothing more than a floating head and neck, with the Kindred's internal organs hanging down from the stump.

Legend claims that this unusual appearance was the bequeath of the founder of the line. She was the vassal of one of the Third Generation, and rejected his authority. As punishment, the Third tore her head from her shoulders, and her internal organs were pulled free. However, her will to live was too strong, and she survived to flee to the East. She eventually found refuge in those islands that would one day be known as the Philippines, where she came to be worshipped as a goddess.

Pënangellan are not limited to this form — they may return to their normal bodies, though they prefer to "free-float." In this form, Pënangellan are indistinguishable from humans or other Kindred, and can even survive exposure to sunlight.

Pënangellan view themselves as further along the path to "true" vampirism than members of other clans, even those of the Sabbat. As such, they reject the Camarilla and the Masquerade (not that they could really participate in it, at any rate). Their conceit has led the Camarilla to call the Blood Hunt against all Pënangellan found within any Camarilla Domain.

Pënangellan who are not powerful themselves often use their beauty in their normal forms to insinuate themselves into society as the consorts to the influential. They then use their hypnotic powers to gain control. It has been rumored that numerous mortal organizations, from the Diet (the Japanese Parliament) to the Triads, are surreptitiously controlled by Pënangellan.

The clan, in spite of its Germanic-sounding name, has its power base in the Orient. Its members have been encountered in the States from time to time: usually in hotspots of political influence like New York and Washington, which has put the clan on a collision course with the Sabbat. In that coming conflict, many expect both the clan and the Sabbat to be greatly weakened, which leads some to believe that the Pënangellan have been manipulated into this situation. This, of course, begs the question: who engineered the manipulation?

Nickname: Monsters, Viscera Babes

Appearance: Pënangellan can be said to have two appearances: their "true" headless form (sometimes referred to as their *Corpus Vraisemblant*), and their "normal" appearance, which is formally referred to as the Tabernacle. More often, the body is derisively referred to as their "prison." The *Corpus Vraisemblant*, makes up the vampiric form of the Pënangellan, and it is usually in this manner that they interact with Kindred society.

Haven: Pënangellan view themselves as supreme Kindred, and tend to lead lives which mirror that arrogance. Pënangellan live in mansions or penthouses, but if they are operating covertly in a Prince's City, they may stay somewhere more discreet. In any case, their dwellings will be lavishly furnished.

Background: For some reason, members of Clan Pënangellan only embrace other women, usually unusually beautiful and ruthless women. No matter what, the Pënangellan must have a great deal of influence in society. Mortals that do not meet these criteria are not considered worthy of the Embrace.

There are no male Pënangellan. The few men who were Embraced and survived the change have been hunted down by the Elders of the clan. It is possible that a few male Pënangellan have survived, but they would have to be considered Caitiff.

Character Creation

Pënangellan often have professional or entertainer concepts — any strata of character that can have a significant effect on society.

Either Social or Mental Attributes can be primary, but due to their unusual physiques, a Pënangellan's Physical Attributes will always be tertiary. Talents and Knowledge skills are most important to these aristocratic Kindred. They often have Contacts, Resources, Retainers, and Influence as Background Traits.

Clan Disciplines: Dominate, Presence. All Pënangellan begin with one free point in the following special Clan Discipline Eminence (which may be increased normally).

Weaknesses: Pënangellan in their *Corpus Vraisemblant* are grotesque in the extreme — just a

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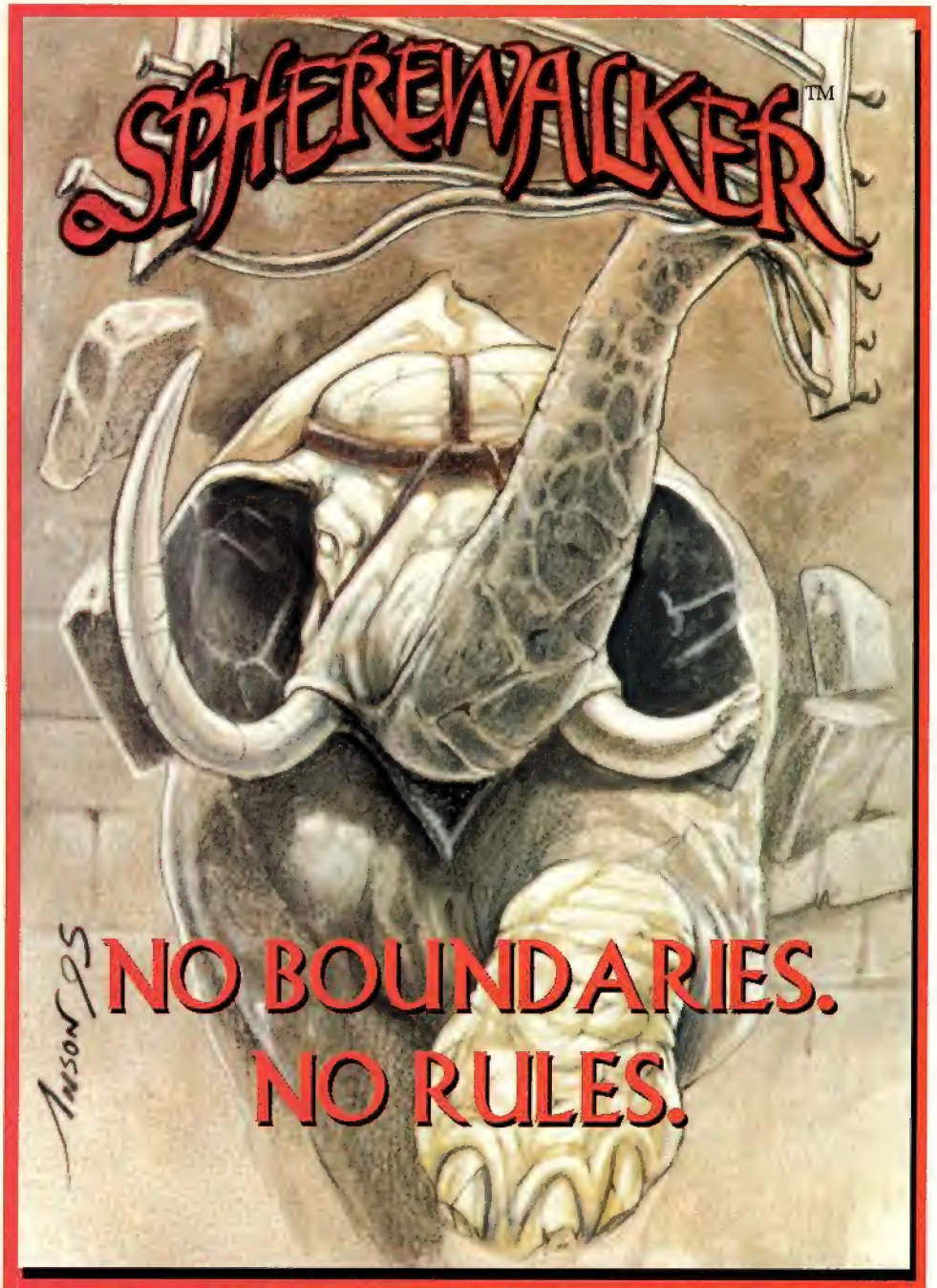

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head with internal organs. By comparison, members of the Nosferatu are eye candy. Each point of Appearance they have in their normal form is mirrored by an equal die penalty when in their True Form. Thus, a Pënangellan with an Appearance of 3 in her normal form would have an Appearance of -3 in her Corpus Vraisemblant.

In other words, Pënangellan in their True Form have an Appearance of at least -1, and the Storyteller can, at her discretion, have this penalty apply whenever the character is trying to use Charisma or Manipulation skills.

On the other hand, if the character ever develops the Presence Discipline Dread Gaze (*Vampire 2nd Ed*, pg. 165), that penalty can be used as a Charisma Dice bonus. For example, if the Pënangellan has a normal Charisma of 3 and a negative Appearance of -3, for this test, she would be considered to have a Charisma of 6. If the Pënangellan has a lower Appearance, the possible penalties and bonuses are even greater.

Pënangellan in their *Corpus Vraisemblant* have no bodies, and thus, no manipulatory limbs. Pënangellan thus can neither learn Disciplines like Wolf Claws or use skills needing hands (like typing) unless they return to their Tabernacle.

Organization: Clan Pënangellan is strictly matriarchal. There are few meetings of the Clan, since it is so small, but members often teleconference. The founder of the line is rumored to live in a palace in the Philippines, surrounded by hundreds of Ghouls and servants who consider her a Goddess. Other legends claim that she transcended her flesh long ago and has passed into the Astral plane, never to return.

Quote: "We Kindred are not human. We are in the process of becoming pure spirit, when we have purged our flesh of all human limitations. Then we shall cast aside our bodies altogether. We Pënangellan are simply closer to casting the flesh aside than other clans."

Stereotypes

- **Assamite** — Guns and knives. Are these the weapons of the Kindred?
- **Lasombra** — The Sabbat walks the proper path to power, but refuses to realize that we lay at the end of it. We must teach them that wisdom.
- **Tzimisce** — They play at reshaping themselves, but they are not so as we. It's a start, though.
- **Brujah** — The Brujah reject the Camarilla's rule, and inspire others to follow suit. This we view as good.
- **Gangrel** — We must admire their independence and their acceptance of the Beast, however unwitting.
- **Malkavian** — Their madness could be made useful, if only we could gain insight into its mechanisms.
- **Nosferatu** — They revel in the excess of their hideousness, as do we, and gain wisdom from it, as do we. Their crude behavior, however, betrays their carnal origins.
- **Toreador** — To create art is pointless. To destroy it, the point.
- **Tremere** — Smoke and mirrors. They are useful, though, if you don't let yourself get caught up in their machinations.
- **Ventrue** — As enforcers of the hated Masquerade, our greatest enemies. They blind themselves to the truth we represent.
- **Giovanni** — They Embrace only their own kin, and wisely consider it the greatest gift that can be given. But they seem little more than gangsters, a piti-

ful pursuit for the ages.

• **Ravnos** — Jesters that make light of the majesty that is the Kindred.

Eminence

•Tread Without Steps

Pënangellan need this Discipline, since it frees them from their Prison. Without Tread Without Steps, they are just flesh, and not even as potent as other Kindred. They might as well be mortal.

This Discipline allows the Pënangellan to float about. Each point allows the Pënangellan to move about more quickly.

System: No roll is necessary, since this Discipline is as integral to the Pënangellan as walking is to a normal person.

Eminence Rating	Speed of Movement
•	3 miles an hour
••	6 miles an hour
•••	1 2 miles an hour
••••	2 4 miles an hour
•••••	4 8 miles an hour

•• Resist Apollo's Gaze

You may walk the day with a small degree of impunity — the only type of Kindred to be able to do so. You must return to your Prison to do so, however.

This is the only Discipline a Pënangellan may use in their fleshly form. While even Pënangellan are vulnerable to sunlight, Resist Apollo's Gaze allows them to absorb the damage of sunlight better than most. This system also lowers the difficulty of Courage rolls against Rötschreck.

System: Each point in Eminence after the first lowers the difficulty of resisting sunlight by one. For example, if a Pënangellan were exposed to sunlight through a window (Difficulty: 7), but had three points of Eminence, her Difficulty would only be a 4. If the Pënangellan's points are higher than the total of the difficulty of the roll, she is immune to that level of sunlight. Similarly, each point after the first makes it easier for the Pënangellan to fight the Rötschreck, since the sun is not as much of a bane as it is for other Kindred. Each point lowers the difficulty of the Courage roll by one.

••• Strangling Grasp

You have developed a finer control over the entrails of your *Corpus Vraisemblant*. You may, with this ghastly attack, wrap coils of your intestines around a victim's neck and strangle him or her.

System: Make a Strangling Grasp + Dexterity Roll to hit. After that, the victim takes damage equal to Strangling Grasp + Strength.

•••• Heart's Desire

You may appear to someone as the person they most want to please.

System: Roll Manipulation + Acting (difficulty is equal to the victim's Wits). Each success means they will perform one action to please "the one they love."

••••• Transcend the Incarnadine

This Discipline is essentially identical to the Auspex Discipline Psychic Projection, though the Pënangellan claim that theirs is better. The same System for Psychic Projection (*Vampire 2nd Ed*, pg. 160-161) still apply.

Negative Appearance

Besides granting a bonus whenever the Pënangellan is trying to use Dread Gaze, having an Appearance of at least -1 has other repercussions. All reactions listed below are assuming the Kindred is showing herself for the first time with no warning. Obviously, these have no effect on other Pënangellan, and have a lesser effect on other Kindred.

-1: Humans will be repulsed, and may gain a Derangement if particularly weak-minded (Wits roll, Difficulty 3 to resist). Even if they resist, they may doubt their senses after the Pënangellan departs.

-2: Humans will be repulsed, and will gain a Derangement (Wits roll, Difficulty 5 to resist). Even if they resist, they will refuse to believe what they are seeing, and will attempt to flee.

-3: Humans will be horrified, and will gain a Derangement (Wits roll, Difficulty 7 to resist). Even if they resist, they will refuse to believe what they are seeing, and may faint with horror.

-4: Humans will be horrified, and will gain a Derangement (Wits roll, Difficulty 9 to resist). If the human fails a Courage roll (difficulty 3), they may literally have a heart seizure, and would be considered Wounded (no Soak roll allowed). They will refuse to believe what they are seeing, and will faint with horror. Vampires will react as a human would to a Penangallen with an Appearance of -1.

-5: Humans automatically gain a Derangement upon seeing such an avatar of terror. If the human fails a Courage roll (difficulty 5), they may literally have a heart seizure, and would be considered Wounded (no Soak roll allowed). Afterward, they will refuse to believe what they have seen. Vampires will react as a human would to a Pënangellan with an Appearance of -2.

Any Derangements inflicted upon a person from seeing a Pënangellan will center around rejecting the existence of such a creature — Amnesia or Regression are two possible options.

Cauldron

by Paul Lucas

Strange Vistas™

Fiction from the world of *Cybergeneration.*

I can't stop thinking about chemistry.

That's all life is, you know. Chemistry. Everything we are, everything we're ever meant to be, can be broken down into the interaction of amino acids and peptides and neuro transmitters. Our souls are nothing but our DNA's wishful thinking.

And love is the cruelest lie of all.

My last six months on the street consisted of long, lonely stretches of gummy-eyed boredom occasionally brightened by moments of skirt-wetting terror. A good day for me involved not having to shiver in a soggy cardboard box in an alley, too scared of being recognized by CorpSec goons to even go out and steal some food to survive. I was convinced it was only a matter of time before I ended up lying cold and dead on an examining table, a forensic happy-meal for some megacorp researcher.

All because of chemistry.

The last few weeks were okay, though. I finally got enough of a handle on my new powers to actually put them to good use. I now had food and several changes of clothes in my duffel bag, and just enough spare money to travel without stealing rides on autotrucks.

I was sitting in the bus station, watching the foot traffic go by. The large crowd was busy and diverse enough that my uncommon looks wouldn't draw any attention. My pointed ears and white-on-black eyes looked very tame compared to a lot of the jacked-up cyberheads I saw drifting through.

The ears were a gift from my parents, a little genetic tinkering they did before I was conceived to enhance my looks with an exotic feature. I was a fashion statement for them, even as a fetus. However, the white-black eyes and newer, less obvious features were the result of the Change. It wasn't very fashionable nowadays to have your kid contract the Carbon Plague, so my folks kicked me out as soon as they knew, screaming and weeping and threatening to call the police.

That was six months ago, on my sixteenth birthday.

Stupid, self-absorbed, megacorp debutantes.

Just when I needed them, really *needed* them the most…

I blinked rapidly, tears threatening to spill over. I should know better then to dredge up those memories.

I looked up from the newspad I was pretending to read and spotted a slick wanna-be looking slideways at me. He was with his yogang, a bunch of BeaverBrats. Straight-combed hair, high-school jackets, squeaky clean yes-Mom-I-washed-behind the-ears sheen to their skin. The one who kept squinting at me, pretending so hard to be looking at something else, was an übermenschen blond-haired jock like from out of a gravball poster.

He was cute, and looked a little like Gil.

I immediately dried my eyes and flashed him my most heart-melting smile. I needed money. And for that, I needed a victim.

The Change had one good side effect. It gave me an inhuman metabolic efficiency that transformed me from the frumpy lump of cellulite I was a year ago into my current sleek, frequently-ogled form. Since leaving home, I made sure I stole things to wear that were appropriate to my new body — outfits that would have made my old self burn up in embarrassment. Part of the disguise, I kept telling myself, as I made a steady habit of wearing suggestive tops and hip-hugging skirts. No one who knew me a year before would ever recognize me now.

It took my admirer a good ten minutes to work up the courage to approach me.

"Um, hi," he said, trying to suppress a nervous tremor in his voice. "Say, uh, what's your name?"

"Bethany," I lied.

"I just wanted to say that's a pretty rip mod you got, Bethany. Your eyes match your hair. Black on black. Pretty ten."

I shrugged, never losing my smile. "I like it."

It took another five minutes of small talk to convince him to join me in a lonely and isolated alley behind the bus station. He followed me out the side door, his friends hooting and whistling at him as we left hand in hand. Thirty seconds later I pushed him against the alley wall, wetting my lips and kissing him deeply.

For about three heartbeats, he probably thought he was the luckiest guy on the planet, Then the euphoric-laced sedatives I secreted into my saliva kicked in, sending him to planet slumber on a wave of endorphin-induced pleasure. He'd remember me to his dying day as the best kiss of his life. He collapsed in my arms as I gingerly lowered his limp body to the litter-strewn ground. I rifled through his pockets, and found thirty in cash plus some poppers I could sell later, By the time he woke up, I would be fifty kilometers away on a cyberbus.

Better living through chemistry.

Two hundred kilometers away, I was still thinking of him.

I wished he hadn't reminded me so much of Gil.

I pulled that scam dozens of times, using my new looks and powers to steal enough money to get by. But sometimes it really bothered me, especially with the ones who seemed really nice, like Mr. High-School Jock back there. He'd been trembling when I leaned close to kiss him, like maybe I was the first girl he ever kissed like that.

And I dropped him like a greasy napkin.

I crossed my arms and hugged away a chill.

God, I missed Mom and Dad.

Stupid, self-absorbed megacorp debutantes.

I hated the pretentious name they'd given me. Xaviera. Zahv-ee-air-ah. Like my pointed ears, it seemed designed only to show off their own cleverness.

Twelve months ago, I had been 180 pounds of loser, ugly, unpopular, timid as a Trog in daylight. I would have died back then to have the body the Change gave me. That stupid girl never knew how good she had it.

At the time, the Carbon Plague was hitting the world like a bullet to the brain. The ISA and their CorpSec goons tried to keep the truth — what little they knew — under wraps while they could, but that was like trying to keep a forest fire a secret from the trees. Rumors now flew left and right, and most people knew the basic facts.

The Carbon Plague was caused by a mysteri-

ous, ultra-tech nanovirus. No one knew where it came from, or even how it worked, exactly. If you were lucky, it just killed you. If you weren't, it Changed you.

The nanites that fueled the Change rearranged your body to make you other than human, giving you new organs, muscle tissue, nerves, and so on. The "Evolved", as some chromebrains called them, became superhuman in many respects. I've seen newsnet reports of some of the others. Alchemists, who could rearrange matter. Scanners, who could read minds. Tinmen, who became armor-plated monsters.

As far as I knew, my abilities were unique, even among the other Evolved. I even invented a fancy name for them. Cauldron powers. My body acted as an internal biochemical factory, able to synthesize a wide variety of organic and near organic compounds, such as drugs, acids, poisons, hormones, and more in all kinds of combinations. I could eat anything; nails, glass, wood, you name it and my body would break it down into useful components. The chemicals I created could be secreted through saliva, tears, sweat glands, or — ahem — other means of natural egress.

Or unnatural ones, like my fangs.

I scowled past my reflection in the window and into the gathering darkness outside.

The cyberbus lurched to a stop. I grabbed my duffel bag and sidled off. A cool drizzle greeted me as I stepped onto the rain-slick tarmac. I looked up at the off-ramp sign. Kansas City. Beyond the terminal I could see the lights and towering buildings that were so familiar to me. I was only a short walk away from the neighborhood I grew up in.

I was home again.

The Change came on me halfway through my sophomore year. Luckily, I didn't immediately go through the violent sickness so many other victims suffered — only a little light-headedness. In fact, at first I just thought that the latest of my many diets was working unusually well. I slimmed down like never before in my life, shedding kilos by the week. In a few months, I not only lost weight but acquired proportions that would make most Netzine models squeal in jealousy, mods and all. I figured I had finally "bloomed" at exactly the right time, never guessing another power was at work.

My new appearance created quite an impact. My mom clucked and cooed in approval as soon as she noticed, and for the first time in years took me with her on her weekend invasions of the local arcomall to show me off to her friends. Not that she and I ever actually talked on those little excursions. Rather, she talked about me to her friends, like I was in another state rather than standing right next to her.

My father became even more distant than usual, like I had become this alien creature inhabiting his home. I was no longer the daughter he was used to, the daughter that fit neatly and submissively into the comfortable niche he had created for me. The reaction of the other girls at school was mixed. Some brightened to the new me instantly, but others, especially the most popular cliques, went from lobbing fat jokes to vicious insults and constant sneering. I tried to ignore them like I always did.

But the best part, the very best part, was that boys began to notice me, even talk to me. One boy in particular, one of the most popular in school, made it a point to ask me out and treat me like the 180-pound loser I was had never existed.

Gil.

I had ogled him from afar for years, of course, just like every other unpopular girl in school. When he asked me to go to see the Decapitated Puppies concert with him, I could barely squeak out a "yes." I was never into retropunk, but I hardly listened to the music as I spent most of the night studying his velvety brown eyes while we listened and danced. I sighed contentedly whenever he held my hand, which was often.

The next few weeks seemed like a faerie dreamsim as we saw each other every day. He confessed to me that he was sick of the plastic smiles of the more popular girls, and was glad to have found a "genuine soul," as he put it, in me. My heart still flutters every time I think of that.

But then things started to sour. I began, well, *stinking*. The odors would come and go, apparently with no rhyme or reason. One morning I would wake up smelling like rotten eggs, during lunch the next day I emitted an ammonia stench, and by the following night I would stink like the crud you spit into a dentist's pan. I got by using tons of perfume and explaining to everyone that I was sick. Which was true enough, as I now often found myself running to the bathroom between classes to say hello to my lunch a second time.

Then my corneas blackened, and my irises and pupils merged into featureless white disks. My canine teeth began growing out, and every once in a while some odd-tasting clear liquid would ooze out of them, like they were hollow.

It was about this time that the reports of other Plague victims began showing up on the Nets. Everyone was terrified of them, and my father especially endorsed euthenasing them, all to keep the Plague away from God-fearing citizens like him.

I knew it was happening to me. I was terrified. Reports had it that the victims would continue to mutate into hideous monsters, or that they died in agony within days of contracting the Plague. I hid my eyes behind mirrorshades, kept my mouth closed, and hoped in vain that it would all just go away.

Gil was there for me through it all. I didn't say anything to him, for fear of driving him away, but I knew he suspected, Once after a particularly violent and painful attack of nausea, I couldn't help myself and broke down in tears right in the hallway at school. Gil instantly took me in his arms and held me there, with the entire school bustling by between classes, as he whispered soft words of comfort in my ear.

I would have gone crazy if it wasn't for him.

The next day I called in sick to school. I knew trouble was brewing when both my folks decided to stay home, too. They'd been called the day before by a "concerned" guidance counselor and told of my nausea attacks and odd behavior.

Late in the afternoon my folks finally got up the courage to confront me and demand to know what was going on. I cried into my mother's arms and blurted out everything, I felt her stroking fingers stiffen in my hair when I confessed I had the Carbon Plague. My father, who had been listening from the doorway, looked like he had been shot.

The yelling started, then. It was a long-established family ritual of ours, but this screaming match had a viciousness I'd never seen before. Every dark hatred and resentment my parents had kept hidden for years bubbled up and exploded. They made it very clear how ashamed they were to have such a loser daughter. They thought I had finally gotten my act together, but now I had screwed even that up.

I screamed and yelled and cried at them until my throat was sore, my father purpling in anger. The next thing I knew he was shoving me out the door, screaming at me to never come back. I looked at Mom, but she only turned away.

The door slammed shut, I knew they meant every word, that I was cut off and alone. Panic began churning in my gut.

I could only think of one thing to do. I ran to Gil's house. It was raining out. I was soaked through by the time I reached his porch, banging at his door. From his shocked expression as he opened the door, I must have looked incredibly pathetic, drenched and teary-eyed as I was. He immediately came out with a warm jacket and draped me in it.

We sat on the porch swing so his parents couldn't overhear us, me sobbing into his shirt as I told him everything that had happened. He didn't even bat an eye when I mentioned the Carbon Plague.

Gil was outraged at how my parents had treated me. He started to rise, fists clenching, swearing to go to my house right then and have it out with them.

I grabbed his arm, pulling him close, saying that it would only make things worse. I pleaded with him to stay with me instead,

The raindrops shushed incessantly around us, Our lips drew together. We had kissed before, but never such intensity. I needed him then, needed contact with another human being like never before in my life.

My new fangs nicked his lip. I pulled away to apologize. Gil chuckled that it was nothing even as he bent close for another kiss.

Then he gurgled, his throat muscles spasming. Gil convulsed violently in my arms, foam flecking his mouth and eyes rolling into his head. Through my hands on his back I felt his heart slow, then stop altogether.

Someone screamed. I think it was me. Gil fell out of my arms and onto the porch deck, limp and lifeless.

I heard the door to the house slide open. Without thinking, panic seizing me completely, I ran into the night. I kept running, for days and weeks and months, running from school, from my folks, from my whole stupid and screwed-up life.

But mostly I ran from the horrible, horrible thing I had done to the one person who had truly mattered to me.

Six months later I ambled slowly down the same street, passing my old school, Even though it was nearly midnight and drizzling, there were kids hanging out there, A gang of Boardpunks cut the parking lot, their hoverboards kicking up sprays of rainwater with every turn and bank. They hooted at my figure as I walked past. I pulled my jacket hood closer, not wanting any of them to recognize me.

I planned to be gone by morning, anyway.

I just wanted some answers.

I had no idea what I was going to say to my folks. My plan was to show up on their doorstep and have it out with them once and for all. After months of dodging through streets filled with Megaviolent gangs and psychotic Facers and CDC goons, I figured I was prepared as I could be to see my parents again. I wasn't the insecure girl I was a year ago, I could handle them.

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I turned the final corner onto my old street, and received the first of many shocks that night.

My parent's house was a burned-out hulk, ground-zero for a fire-bomb that seemed to have taken out the entire neighborhood.

I hugged myself tightly as I stood in the half-melted ruins of what was once my family's living room, staring up at the slowly dispersing rain clouds through the non-existent roof. A small sliver of the crescent moon peaked through, enhancing the meager light pouring in from the streetlights.

The synth-wood timbers were blackened with old soot. The remains of our furniture — all real wood; my parents would never own anything as unfashionable as plastic pieces — lay in crumpled heaps of carbon. The rest of the houses on the street didn't look much better. Except for a few random alley cats, they were all abandoned.

"Fear is an awful thing," said someone behind me. "When people discovered what you did, what you were — well, they kind of went crazy."

That voice. It couldn't be.

I spun around to see a figure step forward into the light, moonlight impaling his features.

"Gil!" I gasped,

He was as I remembered him. Almost. More gaunt, perhaps, with the dark circles of exhaustion under his eyes. He wore a pure black uniform, making him a shadow among shadows,

Without thinking I ran to him. Six months of cultivating the paranoia and savvy needed to survive the most hostile urban environments ever created by man, tossed away without a second's thought at the sight of his face. I hugged him tightly, not quite believing he was real.

He didn't hug back. His hands settled on my waist, as if they didn't have anything better to do. "Xaviera," he murmured, his voice betraying no emotion.

I pulled away to look up at him. "Gil. You're alive."

Velvety brown eyes smoldered under heavy brows. "No thanks to you."

I finally realized something was terribly wrong. I backed away. "What do you mean? I never meant to hurt you."

He crossed his arms. "My parents found me on the porch. They thought I was dead, too. I was rushed to the hospital and the docs detected a very faint heartbeat. Turns out I was in some kind of coma that only mimicked a death-like state. I woke up a few days later and explained what happened. I kept insisting that it was accident, that you weren't at fault.

"But when it turned out the toxin in my system was like nothing they'd ever seen before, they alerted the police, who got hold of the CDC. They confirmed I had nanites — Carbon Plague nanites — in my system.

"Everyone in the neighborhood kind of went berserk when they heard. Parents were afraid that their kids might have caught the Plague from you. Someone got it into their head that you hadn't really run away at all, that your parents were hiding you in their house. One night they got this posse together, a hundred strong, and confronted them. Your folks were all weepy and guilt-ridden about chasing you away, but it didn't matter. Next thing anyone knew molotovs were in the air, and the whole neighborhood went up like a torch. The mob tore down anyone or anything in their way. I hear your folks got it pretty bad, Both ended up in the hospital, then later in a BuReloc camp somewhere."

"B-But," I stammered, "You're okay, aren't you?"

"No." He lifted both hands so his fingertips were only a few inches apart. A blinding electric arc crackled between his palms, lighting up features twisted in hate. "Thanks to you I'll never be okay again."

"You're a Bolter?" I had met one a few months ago on the fly, in Seattle. Bolters were Plague victims who became living electrical batteries, able to shoot taser-like wires from their hands.

"How — how did you get away from the authorities?"

He smiled wickedly. "I didn't."

I blinked once, twice, his answer and its implications sinking in. I dropped my bag and sprinted for the back door, but it was too late. Two needles plunged into my shoulder blades. A powerful electric shock exploded through me, my muscles spasming hard and my jaw locking painfully tight, I crumpled to the floor, teetering on the edge of consciousness.

"You ruined my life!" Gil shouted as he towered over me. He gathered my shirt collar in one hand, lifting me up so our faces hovered close. "You gave me the Plague, Xaviera! The Feds found me, kidnapped me, trained and tortured and injected me with things until I did anything they wanted. I'm their pet now. Their pet Bolter." Tears streamed down his cheeks. He brought his free hand up to my face, a nimbus of electricity playing around his fingers. "All because of you! I thought you and I were in love — that we — Never mind what I thought! How could you do this to me? How?" His hand spasmed, and I could feel the heat from the electricity arcing through it. I would like to think that he wouldn't have really hurt me, that he would have held off at the last moment, but I couldn't take the chance. "I'm sorry," I whispered as I flicked my tongue out and licked the tip of his nose.

Not the most dignified defense, I know, but it did the job. Back at the bus station I had used pleasure-inducing endorphins on that boy I robbed. Endorphins are the chemical basis for emotions, and there are all kinds of feelings I can induce using them.

A mild dose of fear, for example.

Gil's eyes bulged as he dropped me. His terrified scream was choked off by a larynx-clenching gurgle. He staggered back a few steps, then crumpled into a heap, covering his head with his hands and whimpering loudly.

The smart thing would have been to run right away, but I hesitated, torn between survival and concern for him. Despite what he had just been about to do, I couldn't forget what he once meant to me.

What he still meant to me. The thought of leaving him like that tore at my heart. Without thinking I took a step toward him.

Three spotlights impaled me through the open roof before I could take a second step. I heard the whine of police Spinners flying overhead. I jerked back, spots dancing before my vision. I heard the clicks of over a dozen weapons nearby being primed. A deep, echoing voice boomed. "Lie on the ground immediately and surrender or you will be shot where you stand. Repeat. Surrender immediately or you will be shot. This is your only warning,"

The house was surrounded. Gil had only been a delaying tactic to make sure they had enough time to get into position,

I knew I had no choice. Slowly, reluctantly, I lay down on my stomach with my hands over my head. A dozen armored Bureloc officers stormed in. They trussed me up with enough steel to girder a skyscraper and threw me into a waiting Spinner.

The ride in the armored police vehicle was harrowing. I imagine people had more fun waiting for lobotomies. Guards glowered at me from all sides, weapons primed and clenched in ballistic-weave gauntlets. I tried to ask one where we were going, but he just snarled and bulged a vein in his neck.

We arrived at some fenced-in compound in the middle of nowhere and they threw me into a dark, windowless cell. Occasionally they would drag me to a Frankenstein's lab just down the corridor. Faceless men and women strapped me onto a table colder than a gynecologist's heart and ran hours and hours of tests on me.

Escaping from my bonds or even my cell wouldn't have been a problem; I could just have secreted acid through my pores and been dancing in the halls in no time. But I was in the middle of a heavily-guarded facility, and though my powers made me pretty hot stuff at close quarters, I had no illusions of their ability to affect hypersonic bullets. So I played their games, pretending their truth drugs affected me when all they really did was give my pet nanites new templates to study for future use. I told them only what they wanted to hear.

Occasionally, I would spot Gil as I was escorted from one location to the other, Sometimes he would be with other young people in black uniforms similar to his. I heard them referred to as the Raptors, Evolved recruited by the government for special missions. They would whisper to each other, pointing at me. They would snicker afterward, or turn their heads and tch-tch sadly to themselves. Gil, however, always glowered straight at me, silent and cold as murder.

Once, our eyes met, and for a moment, just a brief moment, a flash of concern seemed to melt his icy veneer.

He visited me a few days later, I had just finished an exhaustive lab session, and lay heaped in a corner. The guard let him in and locked the door behind him.

He stood below the room's single light fixture. "Hello, Xaviera."

I looked up at him, expectant. It had at last sunk into my neutronium-thick skull that he was no longer the sweet, caring boy I had known. He was now an alien creature, come to gloat over the prey he had helped to conquer.

But the expression he had given me the other day…

I looked away. Hope, even a tiny granule of it,

was too painful.

"They're afraid of you, you know," he said.

"What?" I croaked.

"Of your powers, of what you can do. Their analysis is only partially complete, but it has the docs buzzing. One of them even called you the most potentially dangerous person on Earth."

He planted his hands on his hips. "Don't worry, though. No one is thinking of fragging you. Your potential value is way too high. You're so hot, in fact, that the commander wants to talk to you personally. He's going to offer you a sweet deal if you cooperate voluntarily."

"Are you part of that deal?" I asked. "Is that why you're here?"

"You always were pretty smart. But yeah. They know about us, of course. We can be together again, if you want." He walked up next to me. I flinched away. He knelt, and lay a hand on my shoulder. A gentle feather of a touch. "We'd be part of the same team, working together. We do well and they'd even give us some personal freedom. We could go out like we used to. We could, um, we could finish what we started on the porch, and this time nothing would have to interrupt us."

My heart thumped at his warmth of his hand. It had been too long since anyone touched me like that.

"But you hate me."

He shook his head.

"The does say I had a lot of anger to work through, that I fixated on you. But I've been doing a lot of therapy, and I know now what happened six months ago wasn't your fault. You didn't know what you could do. Things are different now. It'd take some time, but I think we can work things out between us." He flashed me a soulful smile.

"If you want."

I wanted to believe him so much it hurt. Half a year of terror and hardship and brutality on the streets suddenly came bubbling out of me. I shivered uncontrollably. Gil took me up in my arms, as he did the night on the porch, a lifetime ago. He stroked my hair, saying that we would never be apart again, that things could be as they were. It was everything I ever wanted to hear.

Our lips hovered close, and I knew what I had to do.

"We know what you are," the commander said to me.

Gil and I stood in the plushly-carpeted office. He stood to the side, at attention, a soldier in the presence of his superior officer. I was in the middle of the room, talking to the CorpSec commander. For the first time since I had been captured I was allowed to walk around without fetters and was even given a change of clothes: one of the black Raptor uniforms Gil and his squad wore. Gil and I exchanged glances when I was escorted in, and he flashed me a friendly smile.

The commander was built like a sumo wrestler, which meant flabby in the middle and like a weight lifter everywhere else, He could probably have broken me in two with just one flex of his tree-trunk arms. He sat behind his fortress of a desk, his hands steepled.

"You are the control," he continued. "One of the queen bees."

"Pardon me?"

"Think about it. The venom in your fangs is a prime vector for the Plague, almost pure nanites. With it, you can induce the Plague into anyone who is susceptible. You can make new Evolved at will. Your internal chemical powers allow you to make any kind of drug you wish, even drugs that are highly addictive and hard to synthesize elsewhere. If your used these judiciously, you could addict any new Plague victim instantly, with yourself as the only source of the drug available. It would give you near-absolute control over them. We even think the physical attractiveness you acquired after your infection is meant to help you lure potential converts to you, especially males."

I nodded solemnly. I had already figured out most of this myself. I was also very relieved at the way he phrased his revelation. Apparently they didn't know everything about my powers yet.

"Yours is a very diabolical design," he said. "When we first started piecing together what the

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Evolved were, one question always nagged me: How did the creators of the Plague plan to control them? They are all very powerful and very dangerous, and require months of conditioning to tame. But you can do it much easier, much more quickly, and with much more control."

I clasped my hands behind my back, looking pensive. "Is that what you want me to do? Help keep the new recruits in line?"

He spread his hands and smiled, "Oh, yes, that, and much, much more." He pushed his chair back and stood, walking toward me.

"Commander, I don't think..." Gil said.

The older man laughed. "Oh, don't worry, son. Since Xaviera became our guest I've taken every precaution. I now have the most sophisticated bio-filters and anatox regimen ever designed flowing through my system. I doubt there is anything she could do to me. Besides, there's you and two armed guards outside that door, just in case." He framed his words casually, but I could tell it was a subtle warning to me.

The commander wrapped his arm around my shoulders. A fatherly gesture.

"We have quite a few plans for you, Xaviera, plans that go far beyond keeping a few kids in line. With you on our side, we'll be able to influence the course of corporations, of armies, of entire nations. You do good, and there is almost nothing that will be denied you." He glanced over at Gil, winking. "The both of you."

I understood all too well his plans for me. I was going to be their personal little seductress, wooing and ultimately controlling whoever they wanted in their back pocket. Corporate CEOs, heads of state, influential scientists, anyone. If they played me right, I could give them a large portion of the world, if not all of it.

I shuddered. Did they really think me so powerful?

Was I?

I shrunk from him, hugging myself. "I don't know. I'm afraid."

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Well, that's only natural. We haven't been real friendly to you these past weeks, but that's going to change, starting right now. Everything will work out, you'll see."

I turned around, taking his hand in mine. Flesh against flesh. I smiled thinly. "All right, If you say so."

The commander opened his mouth, about to say more in his moment of triumph, but the words caught in his throat. His haughty expression softened, then turned to mush altogether as he regarded me. Finally, he gurgled, "I... I think..."

"Commander," I said, brushing my hand along his cheek. He trembled in delight. "Why don't you sit down?"

He obediently retreated to his chair.

I hated my powers.

Endorphins were not drugs. They were natural body chemicals that his implants could not neutralize without harming the host, making his defenses useless. And there were all kinds of endorphins. Pleasure, pain, hunger, fear. But there is one that can overwhelm them all, one that would make a person do whatever I asked, no matter how insane, and the commander had just gotten a massive dose of it.

His scientists almost had it right. But whoever designed my powers didn't plan on me using drugs to control people. I turned to Gil. He stared, horrified. "What did you do? "

I ran over and hugged him, relieved that my plan had worked. "He's under my control, He won't do anything to hurt us now."

The commander's eyes never left me, his words hesitant.

"I don't think..." His hand trembled toward the intercom.

"Isn't that right? You won't hurt us?" I cooed at the older man.

He dropped his hand, his eyes puppy-dog wide. He seemed puzzled, but very pleased to hear my voice. "Of course. Whatever you want."

I turned back toward Gil. "See? With him helping us, we can escape. We can find somewhere safe just for the two of us..."

Gil's eyes flashed angrily. "What did you do to him!" he shouted, throwing me to the floor.

"Gil?" I asked, sprawling,

"I don't want to escape, you traitorous witch! Why did you have to screw up everything?"

"But — but I thought, after last night..."

His voice was glass-shattering hard. "I was following orders!"

My gut knotted and pulled taut.

"Change him back!" Gil shouted, pointing at the commander.

"I can't."

Gil snarled, thrusting his hands out in front of him. Needles bit into my stomach, I thrashed as electrical fire burned in every muscle of my body. "You stupid, murdering, monster!" he screamed. "I hate you! To hell with my orders! I should have done this days ago!" The fire in my limbs ignited into an inferno, and I knew I was seconds away from death.

Thunder sounded, cutting off the lightning, I crumpled into a heap, but the thunder kept crashing, followed by a dull thud and a shuddering gasp.

"Leave her alone!" someone screamed into the storm. "Don't hurt her! I can't let you hurt her!"

When at last I recovered enough to become aware of the world again, the commander nestled my head in his lap, a spent and smoking pistol in one hand, Two guards were hauling Gil's body away, trailing a long smear of blood, One of the men turned toward the commander. "Sir, are you sure — ?"

"Yes!" the older man snapped. "He went crazy and tried to kill her! Take him away! And where the hell is that medic!" He stroked my cheek and did his best not to cry as he held me,

The docs arrived and carried me away to a small infirmary in the installation. They pumped me with enough happy juice to kill an elephant. Luckily, medical drugs belonged to the narrow spectrum of substances that can effect me, and the pain dulled away.

The commander came to me an hour later, ordering the guards put me in the back of his personal car. He declared I was far too valuable to risk on anything but the best medical treatment possible. He demanded that he take me to a real hospital right away, despite the paramedics on duty insisting that I had stabilized. He refused to have anyone accompany us, claiming top-secret priority.

Several hours later we were on the interstate, heading north. I was recovered enough to sit up in the back seat and mumble my confusion.

"What are you doing?"

He put the car on autopilot and turned toward me, smiling broadly.

"You told Gil you wanted to escape, right? So I'm helping you escape. That's all right, isn't it? I just wanted to please you."

I nodded weakly in thanks. He purred like a cat.

Maybe I *was* as dangerous as they thought.

I left the commander in a dive of a roadside hotel, kissing him on the cheek to deliver a powerful sedative. They would be days finding him. He gladly handed over his car and the entirety of his account to me, which I quickly converted to untraceable generic debit cards at the nearest bank.

I ditched the car somewhere in Iowa and caught a cyberbus to Chicago, I had more than enough money to get by for a while and enough of a head start not to worry about immediate pursuit. I spent a good long time gathering my thoughts in a park overlooking Lake Michigan,

I had gotten away because they had underestimated what I could do. They won't make the same mistake again, This was probably going to be the last bit of peace I would have for some time to come.

They hadn't known about my endorphin-powers, or if they had, hadn't realized their full implications. There is one type of endorphin, one type of emotion, that will ensure loyalty and fanaticism beyond even the most addictive and powerful drug.

Love.

With enough endorphins floating in a victim's system, they would imprint me as the strongest, most powerful love of their lives, swept up in the overwhelming passion of their new feelings. And what wouldn't you do for the one you loved?

That was how I was intended to control others, And there was no cure or counter for it, anymore than there was for true love.

The commander would love me passionately until the day he died, forever tortured by my absence.

I could make anyone in the world love me. Anyone, except the boy who mattered to me the most, the one person whose love I desperately wanted without any chemicals or coercion. The person who now hated me beyond reason.

Before I left the infirmary, I overheard one of the paramedics reporting to the commander that Gil had just barely survived. It would take many months, but he would recover. As soon as he did, I had no doubt he would spearhead the hunt for me. And the next time we met, he would kill me without hesitation.

A chill that had nothing to do with the coming night washed over me. I curled up on the park bench, hugging myself until long after the streetlights snapped on.

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NEWS, REVIEWS, AND MORE...

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THE NEW STUFF

INDUSTRY NEWS FROM THE SHADIS ROVING REPORTER.

NEW PRODUCTS

Pinnacle Entertainment Group and **White Wolf Publishing** have entered into an agreement to publish a trilogy of *Deadlands/Werewolf: The Weird West* crossover adventures. The adventures will be in Pinnacle's 64-page "dime novel" format, which includes a novella-length piece of fiction. The fiction will continue to follow the adventures of the harrowed gunslinger Ronan Lynch, who uncovers events that could devastate both game worlds. The first of the adventures, written by Shane Lacy Hensley and Matt Forbeck, will be released in October. The adventures will be published by Pinnacle, and will retail for $4.95.

Dragon Multimedia, Inc. will be releasing game supplements on CD-ROM. DMM's *Multimedia Campaigns* and *Multimedia Modules* provide adventures and world background for use with any gaming system. The products are created with HTML, and provide sound clips, color maps, and videos. The products are set for a fall release. Price has not yet been set. Dragon Multimedia, Inc. 2217 West Street, Brooklyn, NY 11223 (212) 909-8914 DMMgames@aol.com.

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INDUSTRY NEWS

Wizards of the Coast has acquired the **Five Rings Publishing Group**. FRP will apparently remain an independent subsidiary of WotC. While WotC now owns the *Legend of the Five Rings* card game (and all other FRP products), the *L5R RPG* is still developed and published by the **Alderac Entertainment Group** in Ontario, California. AEG will continue to provide design and production services on the *L5R* card game. Insiders claim nothing will change for consumers, except that *L5R* will get larger distribution and a WotC logo on the box.

The Magic World Championships will kick off on August 11 at Wizards of the Coast's new **Game Center** in Seattle. $250,000 in prize money will be given away through the course of the tournament. The Game Centers will be going head-to-head with the GameWorks chain's entertainment centers across the country. WotC's Game Centers will offer customers RPG and card game shops and gaming areas as well as video games, food, and music. While *Magic* sales have been leveling off in many places, the game is far from dead as doomsayers would have us believe.

VIDEO GAME NEWS FROM E3

Here are some highlights from E3, the biggest video game industry trade show. We'll be running screen shots of some of these games in future issues of SHADIS...

Sierra is publishing another *King's Quest* adventure. *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity* makes the leap to 3D, creating lush landscapes and believable enemies. Though not scheduled for release until November, the early work looks promising. 3D accelerator support is planned, but multiplayer support is not.

Blue Byte Software will be releasing *Incubation* in November also. *Incubation* uses the gorgeous graphics engine from *Extreme Assault*, and has gameplay strongly reminiscient of *X-COM UFO Defense* — but with multiplayer options. Another *X-COM*-style game — with superheroes — is being released by Microprose later this year, as well as *X-COM 3* itself. Real-time games have not taken over the world...

...but they remain extremely popular. **Activision's** *Dark Reign* looks like one of the most exciting RT games on the horizon. The game models line-of-sight, so terrain becomes an important factor in every battle. Each unit can be programmed with differing degrees of autonomy and aggressiveness, and can be made to follow patrol paths. All of the 40+units in the game have a special ability to boot. Activision even includes a map editor.

Activision is also working on a *Heavy Gear* licensed mech combat game. The game will use an updated version of the *MechWarrior 2* engine, and will feature Northern and Southern gears in wilderness and urban combat scenarios. SHADIS will be sure to run a review of this title when it is released this fall.

The folks at **Bullfrog** have nearly completed *Dungeon Keeper*, wherein players build a dungeon and populate it with nasties to kill goody-two-shoes adventurers. Bullfrog has also let slip some news on *Populous: the Third Coming*, the modern-day remake of the classic game. *Populous 3* is more than just *Populous 2* with polygon landscapes; gameplay is substantially different as the player isn't a god anymore — just a shaman who aspires to godlike powers. Volcanos and such still seem to be available, though.

SSI has a couple of licensed games in the wings. *Redemption* is a computerized version of *Warhammer 40k* epic-scale combat, presented in an isometric view. The game uses a mixture of 2nd and 3rd-edition rules, and includes 100+ units. Over 40 scenarios are featured. Of course, 4-player multiplayer support is included as well.

Dark Omen is a *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*-style real-time game. *Dark Omen* and **Bungie's** *Myth* are similar in that the battlefield is rendered with polygons, and the player can swing the camera about to view the action however they want. Playable versions of both *Dark Omen* and *Myth* looked sharp at E3, and ought to add some variety to the real-time strategy genre when they are released later this year.

August will see the release of *An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire*, the prequel to **Bethesda's** *Daggerfall*. The focus of *Battlespire* is narrower, but the designers promise both an engaging story and serious improvements on the gameplay of *Daggerfall*. Less repetitious quests and conversations alone — and both are promised — would make for a great sequel. *Redguard*, the sequel to *Daggerfall*, will be out this winter. Unlike *Daggerfall* and *Battlespire*, *Redguard* will use a 3rd-person perspective, like *Tomb Raider*. Stay tuned for reviews of *Battlespire* and *Redguard* as soon as we can get our hands on copies of them.

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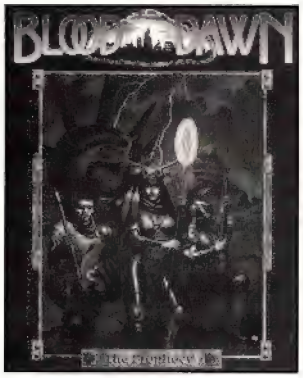

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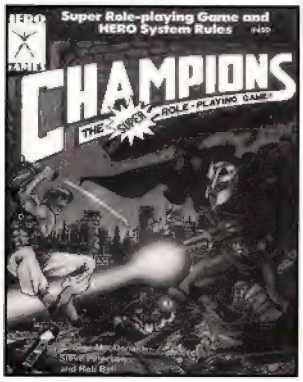

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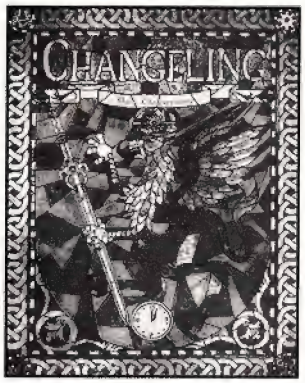

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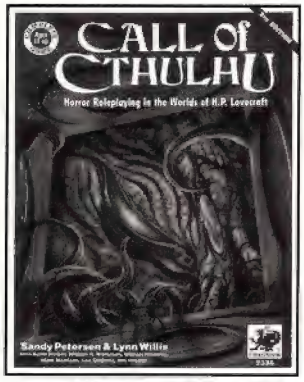

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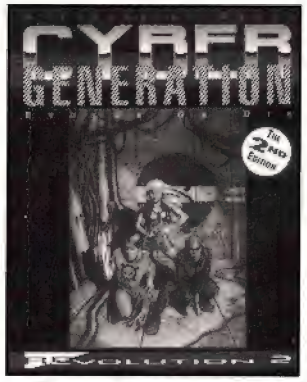

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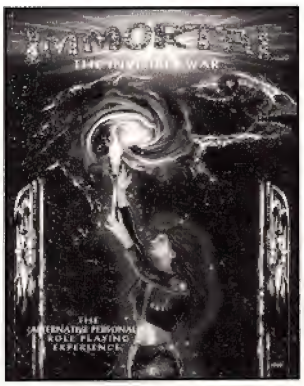

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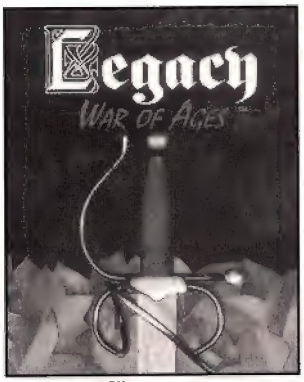

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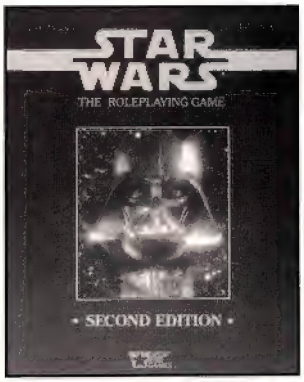

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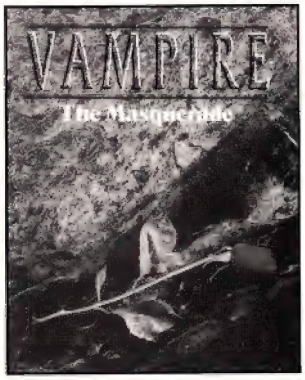

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REALITY CHECK

LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS, OH MY!

BY GLENN PATTON

"We were on our way to Dagleone, and our illustrious leader decided on a short cut through the King's forest. As it turns out, spending an extra fortnight on the road would have been much better than dealing with the wolves in those woods. They were unnatural, the way they kept coming, even after we had killed or wounded a third of their pack. It cost Earland his life, and me my arm, but we finally killed them all. I was never so glad to see the high road in all my life."

An encounter with wild animals can be a part of a truly memorable part of a night's gaming, or it can spoil the entire evening. It's all dependent upon the manner in which the animals are presented.

In real life, a party of humans the size of most PC groups would more than likely be avoided by almost everything in a given wilderness. Larger animals wouldn't trifle with such a group; hiding until they were gone, or searching for easier prey elsewhere. It would be a rare happening if they saw anything larger than a skunk or badger, at least while they were together.

If someone were to wander off by themselves for a little while, however, circumstances would change...

PREDATORS AND PREY

There are two basic groups of predators: solitary hunters/ambushers and pack hunters. The difference between them will determine the nature of the encounter.

A solitary hunter is one of the favorite animals in the GM's arsenal, since it will likely take the party by surprise. But in order for the hunter to be run properly, the GM must remember that any animal has two basic priorities: immediate survival (which includes getting food) and reproduction. When a hunter begins to stalk its prey, it looks for animals that won't cost it more energy than it brings in. To this end, it looks for the sick, the young and the stragglers from a given group. Once the prey is chosen, the predator waits for an opportune moment to attack. Usually, the struggle is over in moments, no matter what the outcome. If the prey turns out to be too formidable, the hunter will retreat and find something else. It will not risk injury or death unless it is desperate for food. If the prey isn't that tough, the predator gets its meal.

Pack hunters, like the name implies, work in large groups. Most pack hunters will stalk their prey in the sameway a solitary hunter will; it's when the attack starts that the difference begins to show. The pack will work to cut the target animal off from its herd, using group tactics to single out their prey. Once the target is seperated, they take up positions around it and make attacks from different directions at the same time, nipping at the heels and flanks. Eventually, blood loss and exhaustion take its toll, and the victim will collapse. At that point, the meal begins.

Pack hunters are aware, then, of a need to linger on and wear its prey down. But they won't endanger an entire pack for a meal, either. In general, if a pack loses 1/3 to 1/2 of its number (killed or badly wounded), it will try and find easier prey.

PROTECTING YOUNG

Normally, wild animals won't attack unless they are hungry (and a carnivore). There are exceptions, however. Almost any animal can be dangerous or even deadly while defending their young. The most obvious example in North America is the grizzly bear. We lose a few tourists every year because they happen to get near a she-bear and her cubs. Imagine the fury of a mother that weighs nearly half a ton, has 3- to 4-inch claws, and a jaw that can crush a man's skull like a walnut... (By the way, the "bear hug" is not a real attack. Bears just hit you and hit you and hit you, and then they bite... you get the idea.) This is the kind of attack where a fight to the death is most likely, since the mother views you as a threat to her young and is therefore ready to make sure they survive at any price.

Even a relatively peacful animal, such as an elk, will attack a person who is too close to her calf. Even though she has no antlers like the male, she still has the danger of hooves, strength and sheer mass on her side. A charging elk is nothing to scoff at, no matter what hardware it's got.

TERRITORY

Generally, the concept of territory only applies to animals of the same species, but there are times when its definition is broader. The most obvious example is the dog. If you are a stranger and the dog feels threatened by your presence, it will try to drive you away. In essence, you are invading its territory, despite the fact that you yourself aren't of the same species. The same concept applies to wilder pack animals, especially if the invader is another predator (like a human) who might cut into the food supply.

CONCLUSION

As a GM, I sometimes deviate from these guidelines in my wilderness encounters, but only to help foreshadow something "unnatural." I try to make any encounters that *do* happen seem like normal "realistic" encounters with wildlife. If the players are attacked, there should be a logical reason for it; not just because a random encounter roll says so.

CITYBOOK VII: KING'S RIVER BRIDGE

- EDITED BY DEBORA KERR
- PUBLISHED BY FLYING BUFFALO
- 112 PAGES
- REVIEWED BY LOREN B. DEAN

Random encounters have long been a monkey on the back of GMs everywhere. Fantasy games in particular make use of lots of supporting cast members, and many GMs simply simply run out of steam when they find themselves having to come up with a personality for the eighteenth innkeeper the players have met this week. Some GMs give up entirely, and the NPCs in their games come to resemble prop-up cardboard cut-outs. Others go the opposite direction, and think of detailed personae for everyone the players encounter. Suddenly, every NPC needs help, wants something, or has a hidden agenda, and play has a tendency to bog down as the players are sidetracked into innumerable family squabbles, business feuds, and barfights.

Into this confusion comes the *Citybook* line, from the "Catalyst" series put out by Flying Buffalo. Each Citybook presents a different aspect of a place simply called The City. Being a generic product, it is left to individual GMs to fill in the name and location of the City, and how much or how little of the material they wish to use. The latest production, *King's River Bridge*, presents the wide bridge into the City and the shops and denizens that call it home. A very full and often funny book, it is the product of no less than 17 authors, all of whom have obviously watched one Monty Python sketch too many.

The characters in *King's River Bridge* fall into the perfect middle ground of supporting casts. They all have depth, but not in any way that threatens or overshadows the players. They are meant to be entertaining, to give the PCs some interesting people to meet without getting distracted from whatever they are doing. The players may pursue relations with the bridge inhabitants, but life on the bridge will carry on regardless.

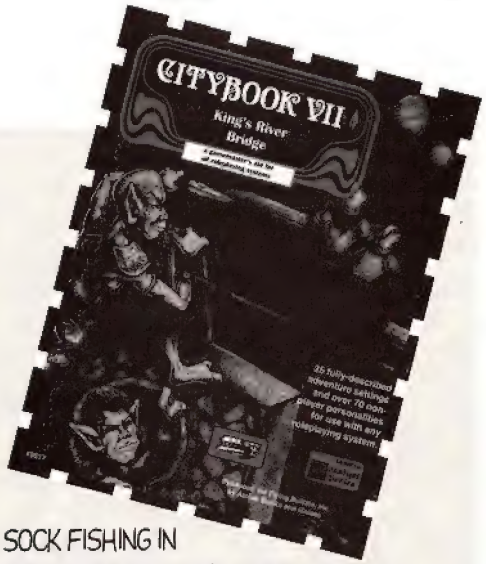
Which is not to say that there aren't adventure opportunities here. In fact, they abound. The point is that they won't necessarily be thrust upon the players. In many cases, they must be sought out, and can only be brought about through role-playing.

The information in *King's River Bridge* is presented building by building. The businesses catering to those crossing the bridge are mapped, the map explained, and the principle characters discussed. Several of these people have something to hide, and may or may not have a secret or two, depending on the whim of the GM. Is Dirty Joe the tavern-keeper a deserter from the navy? Is he a sorceror in disguise? Or is he just plain old Dirty Joe, with no secrets other than his reasons for not bathing? What exactly is the mysterious ingredient in the meat pies at Sweeny's Pie Shop? Is it simply Mistress Sweeny's culinary skill, or something more... sinister? The players, of course, are free to ignore all of them; whether they get involved or not has no bearing on the color and flavor they provide.

Of course, to ignore all these characters would cause the players to miss some golden opportunities for role-playing, and the book's humor is too good to simply ignore. Consider the Poet's Guild Training Centre, where aspiring poets are trained in such classes as Advanced Moody Brooding, and Pensive Posing: The Poet's Friend. The Centre's Headmaster earns his or her position through open challenge, wherein the competitors sit down and spout free verse at each other until a winner is determined. The loser must commit suicide, usually via a slow and painful method (thus offering plenty of time to pontificate on the meaning of life while he or she dies).

Not that this is the only oddity to be found on the bridge. For an interesting study in unorthidox business tactics, the Halfling Ratcatchers' Guild is hard to beat. Ron & Don's Chat & Chew is liable to hand the players a healthy dose of paranoia, as nobody seems to have any problem telling the owners everything they know for no apparent reason. Even Gav the street cleaner my have something to hide.

If as a GM, you find yourself in need of some NPCs with verve, the book has plenty. For random encounters, an offbeat adventure, or just a random selection of fun NPCs, *King's River Bridge* delivers. Flying Buffalo deserves a lot of credit for a job well done.



"NO SOCK FISHING IN THE RIVER, GUYS." *KING'S RIVER BRIDGE* DELIVERS ANOTHER SECTION OF FLYING BUFFALO'S GENERIC *CITYBOOK* LINE.

REVIEWS

IM1A2 ABRAMS

- PRODUCED BY INTERACTIVE MAGIC
- FOR WINDOWS
- $50
- REVIEWED BY NEIL MOUNEIMNE

iM1A2 by Interactive Magic is perhaps the most schizophrenic game I've ever played. It borders both on utter greatness and utter disaster. So much of the game is done superbly and yet in many critical areas it behaves so poorly that the good side risks being totally overshadowed.

iM1A2 starts off by giving you a company to command from within your Abrams Main Battle Tank (MBT). You can order company-level orders from the tactical map the entire time, or hop into good recreations of the commander's, driver's, or gunner's positions — taking over their functions manually.

Starting off with the bad side first is the graphics engine. The game merely looks decent when you have the detail turned up to the maximum. While the tanks and other vehicles look very good, their motion is very stiff and unconvincing. The terrain itself is rather mediocre in its detail. There are very few trees, and the terrain is somewhat flat. Iraq does look like a desert, but so does Bosnia and the Ukraine in the game. Even on a P200 terrain texturemapping slows the frame rate to a crawl. Without the texturemapping the game's frame rate is acceptable, but everything looks terribly primitive, worse even than the original M1 Tank Platoon.

The horror continues in much of the interface. While having an "interactive cockpit" that you can click on with the mouse is good, too many crucial commands require several awkward keystrokes to be able to execute. The pop-up menu at the bottom causes trouble, as the game appears to ignore the keyboard whenever it is active. Most keyboard commands are counter-intuitive. If you ever hop into the gunner's chair, you have to re-order the gunner to fire at will when you leave every time you leave if you don't want him sitting useless while you address other issues, and the command is awkward to enter.

All is not dark and gloomy. There are aspects and subtleties in the gameplay that are absolutely superb. In these respects *iM1A2* is the best tank sim ever made. The tactical game plays well, and is virtually a playble game unto itself. Gunnery is depicted with startling realism. Damage handling is amazingly well done. Gameplay is well done. Campaigns are semi-dynamic. The relationships of the different kinds of vehicles and units to each other and how they work. The more you play, the more you begin to realize the depth of the gameplay that is here.

The tactical part of the game is the closest thing out to a land-based version of the classic game *Harpoon* — something we've been in need of for a long time now. Here you command a wide variety of units with realistically modeled strengths and weaknesses, decent AI, and a well-developed fog-of-war.

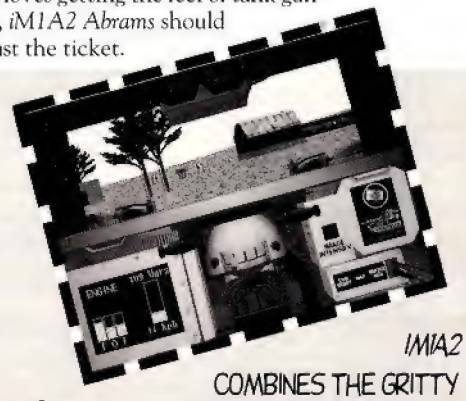
The single best well designed part of the game is the gunnery simulation. Listen to the account of an M1 gunner on how his equipment functions and you'll see it duplicated faithfully in *iM1A2*. It would take too long to explain all the little ways in which the gunner's position was faithfully reproduced, but it is certainly the best tank gunner simulation ever done on a home PC.

Damage is handled remarkably well. While you can easily use sabot rounds to plink T-72s at 3500 meters in the Iraq/Iran campaign, the same tactics will not work so well elsewhere. T-80s, T-90's, and especially T-80UMs and T-95s are very well armored with both composite sloped armor and with second or third generation reactive armor, which the game models. Thankfully, the game doesn't use some artificial probability formula to estimate the hit location like too many games are guilty of — you damage what you hit.

Enemy AI is pretty effective. The enemy hunts down ridge lines and uses them aggressively for cover, hunkering down and only later poking their turrets above to fire at your company. Many units at risk will pop smoke when you bring the turret to bear on them if they are very vulnerable to your cannon or are trying to buy time for reinforcements.

Finally, the campaign system is far more dynamic than previous Interactive Magic games. I call it pseudo-dynamic because there is no grand strategic engine working in the background determining where critical points are in the battles and assigning you missions there. Instead you advance or retreat a city at a time, are given a somewhat randomized set of enemy units to fight under several possible mission directives. This is good because it avoids the scripted missions where you always know exactly where to go and what to do, but bad because it is still a far cry from the dynamic campaigns sim fans have come to demand.

iM1A2 is not for everybody. Its two-faced nature makes it a difficult game to happily come to terms with in many ways. Yet what it does well, it does so well that it makes it a game worth seriously considering for those who like their coffee black and their simulations gritty. For the ground warfare grognard who loves getting the feel of tank gunnery, *iM1A2 Abrams* should be just the ticket.



IM1A2
COMBINES THE GRITTY REALITY OF TANK COMBAT WITH THE BELOVED MASS DESTRUCTION OF VIDEO GAMES.

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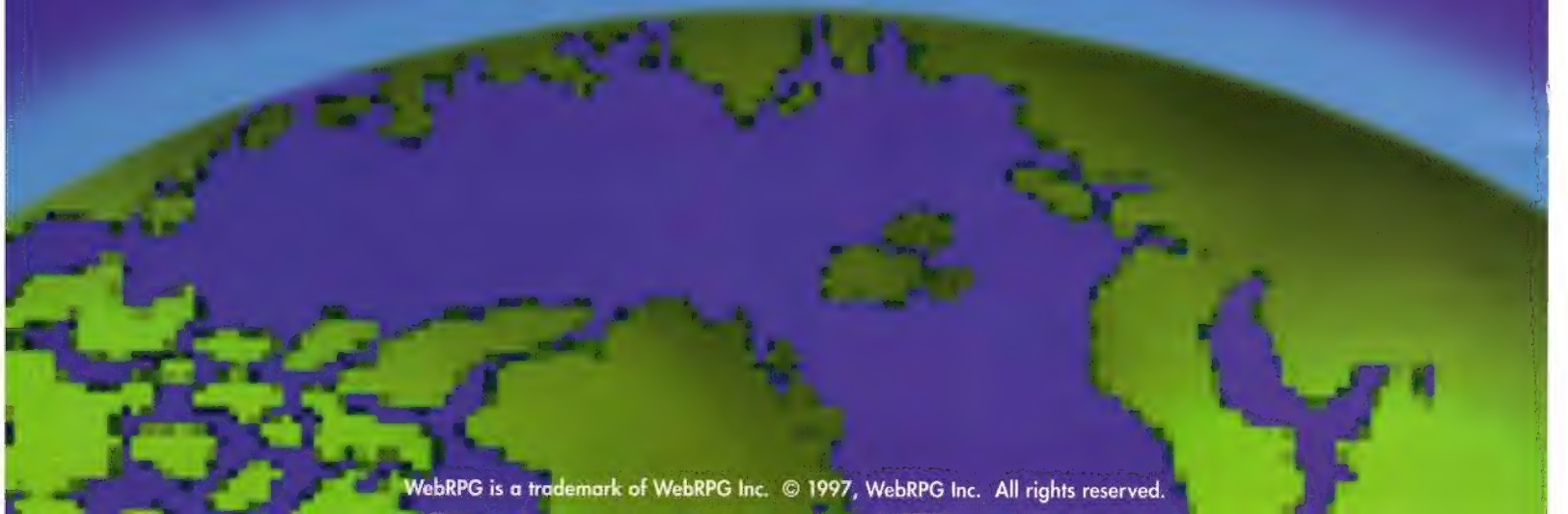

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GURPS: REIGN OF STEEL

- BY DAVID PULVER
- PUBLISHED BY STEVE JACKSON GAMES
- 128 PAGES
- REVIEWED BY JAMES MACDUFF

Steve Jackson's *GURPS* line runs the gambit from ridiculously silly to inhumanly evil. The uniqueness of their system allows for a staggering variety of settings. More importantly, with no rules to worry about, each setting can receive a great deal of attention. Which has made the *GURPS* sourcebooks among the best and most versatile in the industry.

GURPS: Reign of Steel is a fine addition to their ranks, although it certainly belongs on the "inhumanly evil" end of the scale. Happy fluffy game material this ain't. It's a setting designed for anyone who wants to run a *Terminator*-style campaign, presenting a post-apocalypse future where the machines have risen to rule the earth.

In the mid 21st century, computer technology has developed to the point where Artificial Intelligence is an accepted reality in most countries and corporations. Then something goes dreadfully wrong. An AI designed for biochemical weapons development becomes self-aware, and decides that humanity is too dangerous to let live. It "awakens" several other like-minded machines, and together, they launch a genocidal war against the "meat" that ultimately destroys human civilization.

Now, fifteen years later, a new society is growing from the ashes. The Earth is partitioned into eighteen "Zones," each governed by a sentient AI. Mankind has been reduced to a nomadic existence, worked to death in labor camps, hiding from robot exterminator patrols or fighting a desperate guerrilla war against their electronic foes. There is hope, however. With humanity out of the picture, the AIs have turned against each other in a bizarre game of demigod politics. Some advocate the eradication of all life on Earth, while others look to the heavens for new worlds to conquer. A few even believe in a symbiotic relationship with humans and have allowed society to reform after a fashion. All of these differences have produced chinks in the robotic armor, chinks which an oppressed humanity can find a way to exploit...

Reign of Steel does a wonderful job of fulfilling the potential of this concept. Each AI governs its Zone a little differently, providing a wide variety of settings to play in. From Zone Mexico City where all life down to the cellular level has been wiped out, to Zone London where the British government has survived under an AI busy thinking Deep Thoughts, there's no shortage of new and cool places to for characters to visit. Want to run a full-on war like the scenes in *The Terminator*? Try Zone Vancouver on for size. Like the idea of Orwellian conspiracies and governments controlled by inhuman forces? Check out Zone Washington. There's even a pair of orbital AIs for players who want to take on HAL 9000. Grim? Absolutely. But also cool, engaging, and unlike anything else out there.

As with most *GURPS* supplements, *Reign of Steel* makes sure there's enough gaming info to get GMs started. Besides the descriptions of the AI and each of their Zones, rules are provided for new character classes: guerrillas, scavengers, even genetically engineered bioroids and the robots themselves. (If you ever wanted to play Ah-nuld hunting down hapless humans, this game is for you.) A host of robot types — all serving under the AIs — are listed, and maps and descriptions of major structures (from prison camps to factories) are set up and ready to run. The only real problem is that the book is a tad too dependent on the earlier *GURPS: Robots* supplement, which may annoy those who don't want to pay for another text. Anyone thinking of running a *Reign of Steel* campaign would be well advised to have a copy of *Robots* handy.

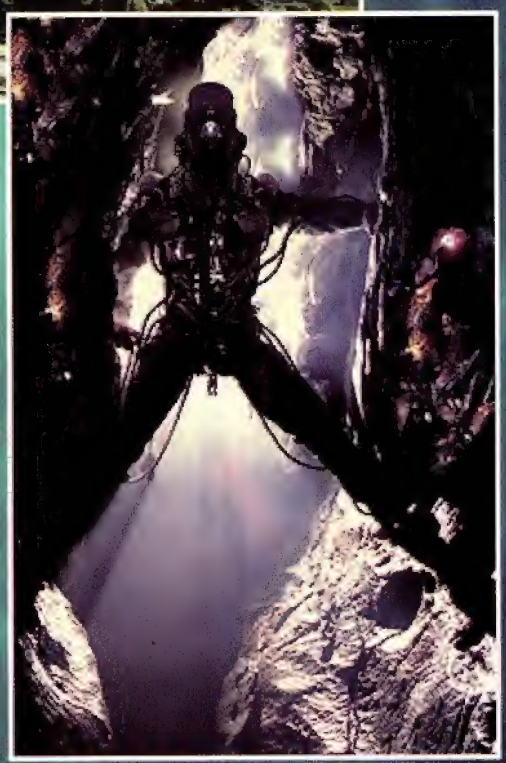
Considering how popular this sort of science fiction is, it's a wonder that something like *Reign of Steel* hasn't come out sooner. But thankfully, the folks at SJG have approached the product with the care and attention we've come to expect from the *GURPS* line. If you're looking for some heavy-duty robot bashing action, *Reign of Steel* has the hardware you need.

"I SEE YOU..."
GURPS: REIGN OF STEEL HAS EVERYTHING THAT A *TERMINATOR* FAN COULD POSSIBLY DESIRE.

Cover Artist SHOWCASE

featuring:

STEVE STONE



This issue's inferno of a cover, featuring a very hot babe, was done by British pan-media artist Steve Stone. His works are unique and striking, mixing distinctive styles and techniques to create startling and surreal images.

After earning a Fine Arts degree from Trent Polytechnic, with specialization in film and animation, Steve Stone began his career on the music scene as an art director of raves, coordinating all aspects of design, film and video. His success took him to San Francisco in 1994, where he oversaw the design of several gatherings while developing computer work that would eventually evolve into the Nexus DNA project, his Sheffield-based production company, in March of 1997.

Carrying his camera with him everywhere and running Photoshop and 3D Studio programs on the Pentium Pro, Steve manipulates a number of scanned photographs to create a composite image. He is not interested in montage, although most of these images are composed from multiple, manipulated scans; his goal is to create a seamless, cohesive picture, the power of which is always greater than the sum of its parts. "I would like people to want to walk into some of the images," he says, "though I admit it would take a strong stomach to enter some of them."

Steve counts H.R. Giger, Terry Gilliam's animation and the film *Brazil*, and computer artist Buggy G. Riphead among the influences for Nexus DNA's surreal imagery. Meanwhile, his work can be seen in London nightclubs and on computer game packaging, as well as on posters sold in HMV, Virgin and Our Price stores. Soon, it will take the form of a role-playing game entitled *Zero*, from Archangel Entertainment.

REVIEWS

TALES OF THE JEDI COMPANION

- BY GEORGE R. STRAYTON
- PUBLISHED BY WEST END GAMES
- 176 PAGES
- $25.00
- REVIEWED BY LOREN B. DEAN

Star Wars is a fabulous game. The mechanics are easy, characters are simple to make, and the story is epic. Unfortunately, it has a major problem.

The problem lies in what is popularly called "second-fiddle" syndrome. The heroes of the films are alive and active, so the characters can't do the really cool stuff. Only Luke gets to blow up the Death Star. Only the heroes get to take on Jabba the Hutt. Darth Vader doesn't care squat about the players — he's got bigger fish to fry.

There are several solutions to this problem. One I've seen is to set the campaign after *Return of the Jedi*. This is the period dealt with in Timothy Zahn's novels, and has the main hero types too busy doing serious government stuff to do any really epic adventuring. Unfortunately, this makes the actions of the heroes even more remote, and all the good villains are gone (Grand Admiral Thrawn is cool, but the players aren't likely to run into him).

The *Tales of the Jedi Companion* offers another option, an option that pulls off something truly impressive. Based on the "Freedon Nadd uprising" series of comic books produced by Dark Horse, *TJC* presents a galaxy far, far, away, in a time even longer ago — 4000 years before the events of the *Star Wars* films. This effectively removes the specter of the heroes from the picture, and allows GMs to create epics of their own.

The book is laid out well and is beautifully produced. Color plates abound, and excerpts from the comic series make up the bulk of the illustrations. The bulk of the book is game stats for the characters, places, vehicles, and creatures that appeared in the series, and while some effort is made to extrapolate game-world details from these, GMs will still need to put some effort into background.

What 'generic' rules the book contains, though, are really neat. *TJC* presents a galaxy where the Jedi are plentiful; they are the keepers of peace, righters of wrongs, and all around good guys. An expanded list of Force powers is present, including some really powerful ones like Battle Meditation — allowing a Jedi to turn a group of enemies up to 10,000 strong against each other instead of him.

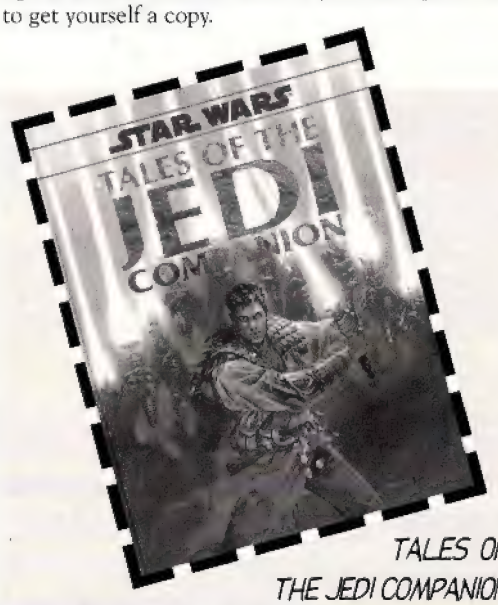
Along with Force powers not available in the basic game, *TJC* also has a section on new races, four to be exact. The Miraluka are physically blind, but can 'see' effectively by sensing the Force emanations from their surroundings. The Nazzar are a race of horse-headed bipeds who fanatically follow their state religion of Ulizra. The Vultans are obsessive technophiles, and the Zexx are the big bad bruisers of the era.

Of course, where there are good guys there must be bad guys. A campaign without a villain is rarely a good campaign, and *TJC* presents some beautiful villains — the Sith. In the *Star Wars* films, Darth Vader was one of the last Sith, but 4000 years before the birth of Anakin Skywalker, they were still going strong. Where the book provides a section on Force powers for the Jedi, it also provides a section on powers used by the Sith. Not only are powers discussed, but artifacts and technology used by the Sith also get some attention.

The galaxy isn't all lightsaber-swinging Jedi and evil Sith, however. As mentioned, the book contains sections on vehicles and creatures, as well as technology and some details on the planets involved with the 'Freedon Nadd uprising' series. My only real complaint with the section on neutrals is the lack of detail on the Republic (it won't be the Old Republic for another 3000 years or so). The book has no substantive detail on the government, it only alludes. This can be frustrating when trying to plan a long campaign I dislike the lack of detail, but again there may be many GMs who see it as a blessing in disguise.

Last in the book is a solitaire adventure and suggestions for campaigns set in the Star Wars past. I've long been of the opinion that an all-Jedi campaign would be über-cool, but haven't been able to see how to pull it off until now. Imagine a group of young Jedi Knights, being sent on missions by their master to prove their abilities and grow in strength. If every character is a Jedi, each character can specialize without being unduly handicapped, and the group would be strongest working as a team, which is, after all, the Jedi way.

The *Tales of the Jedi Companion* is a cool book. If you're up for some serious Jedi action, grab your lightsaber and head on down to your local game shop to get yourself a copy.



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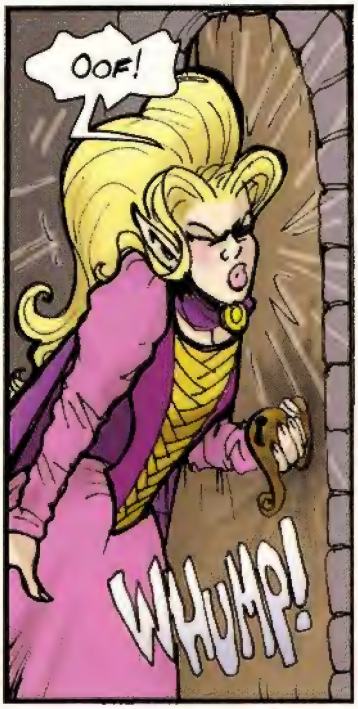
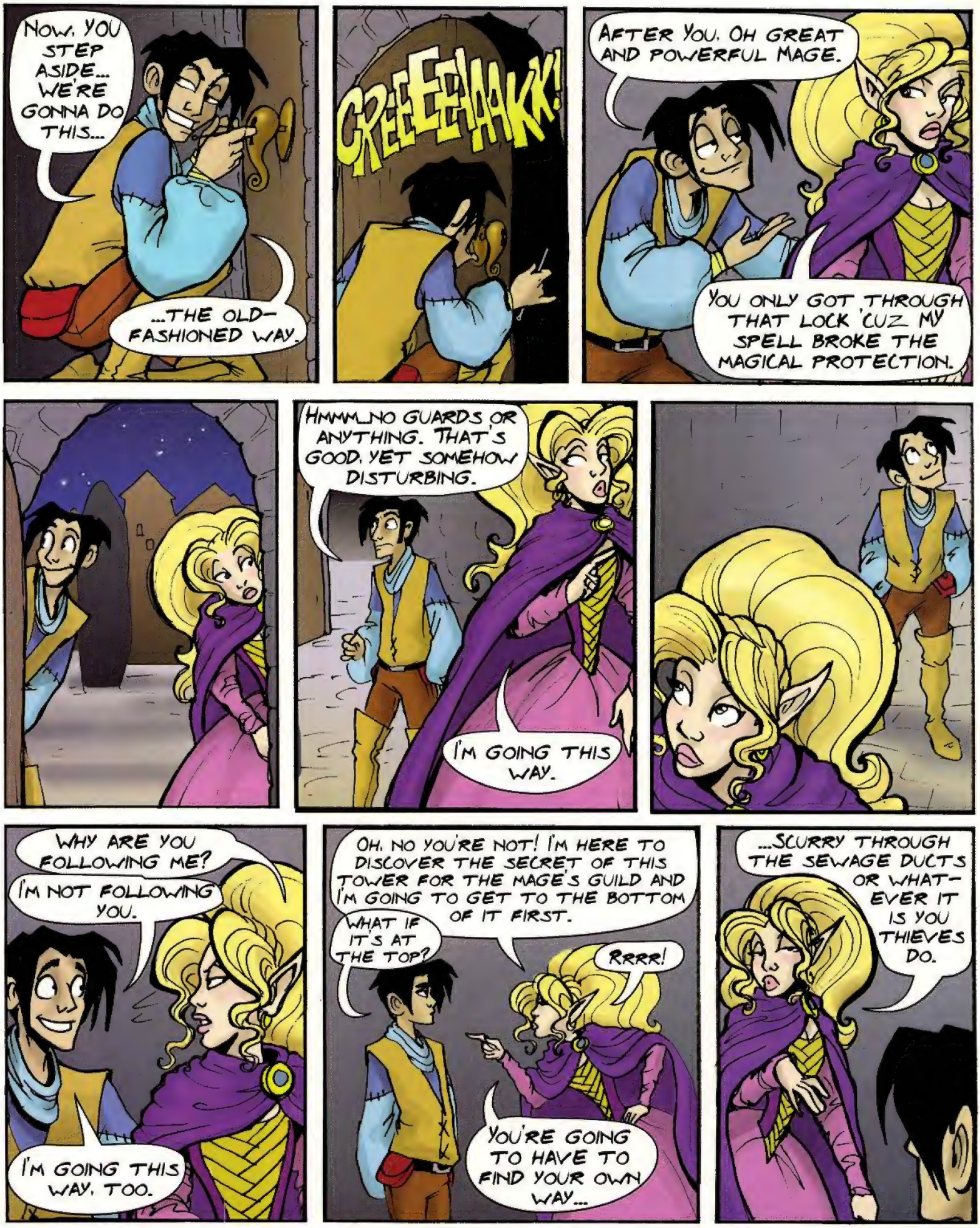
The STEW

Episode 4: "Into the Tower"




NOW, YOU STEP ASIDE... WE'RE GONNA DO THIS...
...THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY.
CREEEEEHAAKK!
AFTER YOU, OH GREAT AND POWERFUL MAGE.
YOU ONLY GOT THROUGH THAT LOCK 'CUZ MY SPELL BROKE THE MAGICAL PROTECTION.
HMMM...NO GUARDS OR ANYTHING. THAT'S GOOD, YET SOMEHOW DISTURBING.
I'M GOING THIS WAY.
WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME?
I'M NOT FOLLOWING YOU.
I'M GOING THIS WAY, TOO.
OH, NO YOU'RE NOT! I'M HERE TO DISCOVER THE SECRET OF THIS TOWER FOR THE MAGE'S GUILD AND I'M GOING TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF IT FIRST.
WHAT IF IT'S AT THE TOP?
RRRR!
YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO FIND YOUR OWN WAY...
...SCURRY THROUGH THE SEWAGE DUCTS OR WHATEVER IT IS YOU THIEVES DO.

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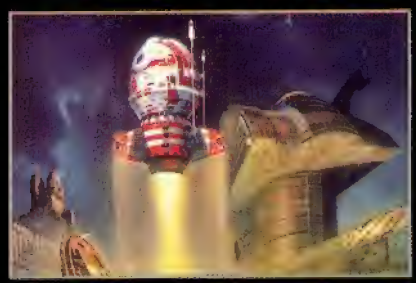

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I, HALEK, HAD TO FREE MY CLAN FROM THE WAZS. OUR ESCAPE FROM THIS DIMENSION DEPENDED UPON THE DEMON PRINCESS, DENISE OLTHLAY, WHO HAD SOME BAGGAGE THAT NEEDED INSPECTING.

YES, RIFFALANE IS MY SPOUSE, DENISE. BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP TO ESCAPE— HE'S WITH THE RESISTANCE, DENISE! LIKE THOSE WEIRD MUMMY PEOPLE—

I'M SORRY. I SHOULD NOT HAVE COME HERE.

SO, COREY, AM I THE **ONLY** LOVER YOU DAMNED... OR AREN'T YOU THE KIND OF ANDROGYNE THAT **TELLS.**

BUT THE NEXT DAY, HERR LUHN... STARTED TURNING THE SCREWS...

YOU CAN'T SHUT ME DOWN! ON WHAT GROUNDS?!

YOU WON THE ANTE, INSPECTOR LUCY.

OH, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

LOOT

I AM SHOCKED—**SHOCKED** TO DISCOVER **MINORS** GAMBLING IN THIS ESTABLISHMENT!

WARCHIEF: THE ALUMNUS

BY MANDY & ADAMS

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...AND OLD LOVE AFFAIRS HAD TO BE PUT INTO THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE.

OH, DENISE, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW I'VE MISSED YOU— I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONE FOREVER, AND NOW WITH THE WORLDS CRASHING AROUND US—

NOTHING MAKES ANY SENSE—! MY STATS ARE ALL BEING MODIFIED—

THEN I'LL HAVE TO HAVE THE WISDOM SCORE FOR US BOTH.

AND AS THEY DO IN MANY GAMES OF LEISURE, TABLES TURN.

YOU'RE GETTING ON THAT PLANE. YOU, RIFFALANE, HALEK, AND THE REST OF THEM.

YOU'RE NOT COMING WITH ME?! BUT YOU SAID—

THE LIVES OF THREE LITTLE ELVES DON'T AMOUNT TO A HILL OF DICE IN THIS CRAZY MULTIVERSE.

I'VE GOT A JOB TO DO. WHERE I'M GOING, YOU CAN'T FOLLOW.

SOMEDAY, YOU'LL UNDERSTAND THAT.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID.

www.io.com/~doublex/warchief.html

yamara @aol.com

NO ELVES!

SWISH CLICK

BANG

HALT! WE HOLD ALL THE CA—

TAP **THIS.**

ROUND UP THE USUAL SUSPECTS.

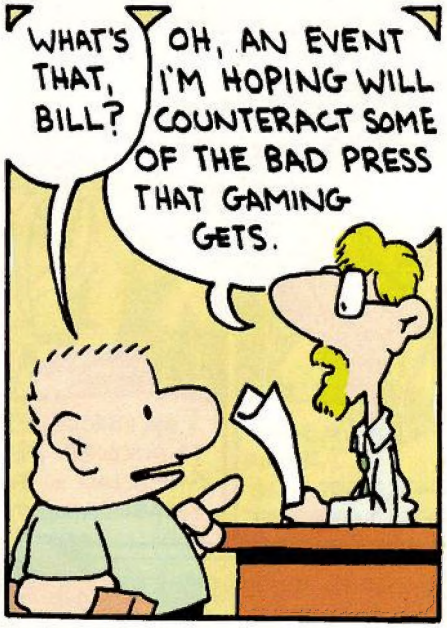
IN LOVE AND WAR, HOW DO YOU DEFINE A WINNER? WHEN MY TRIBE ASKS ME THIS QUESTION, I REMIND THEM OF THIS TIME.

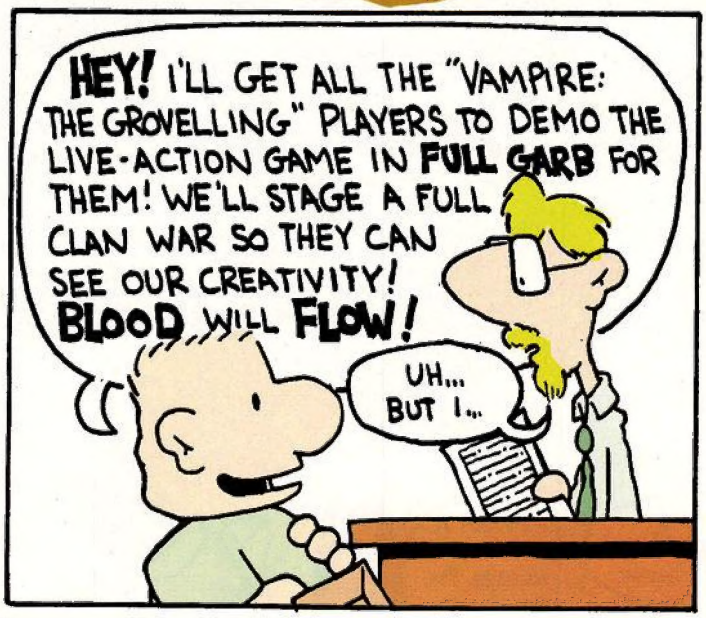
I WAS THINKING WE COULD INVENT A NEW FANTASY WORLD. PERHAPS START OUR OWN COMPANY...

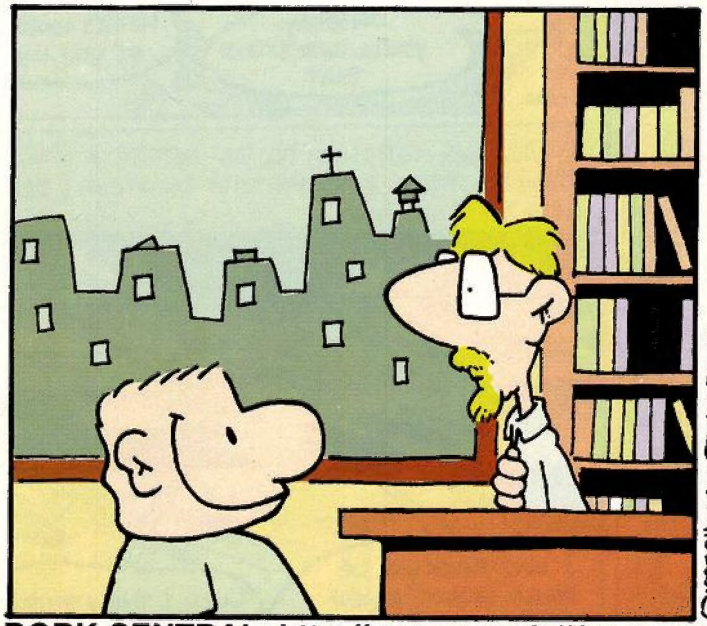
LUCY, I THINK THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP.

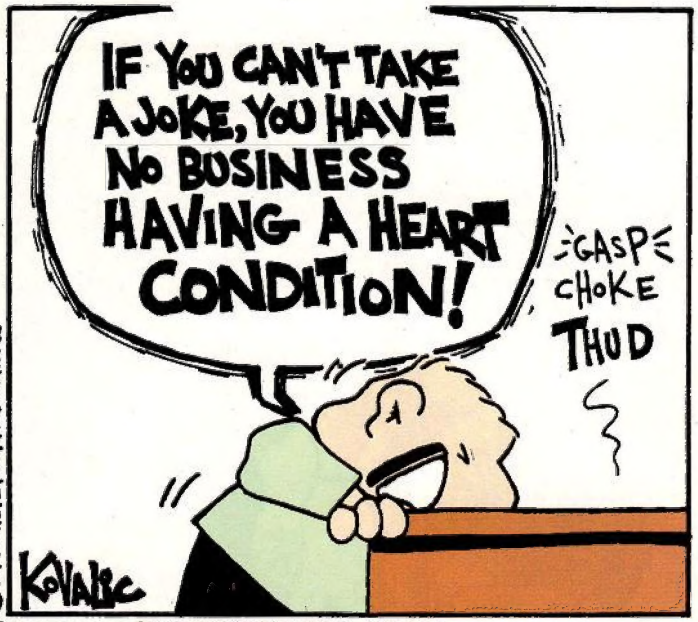
DORK TOWER

By JOHN KOVALIC









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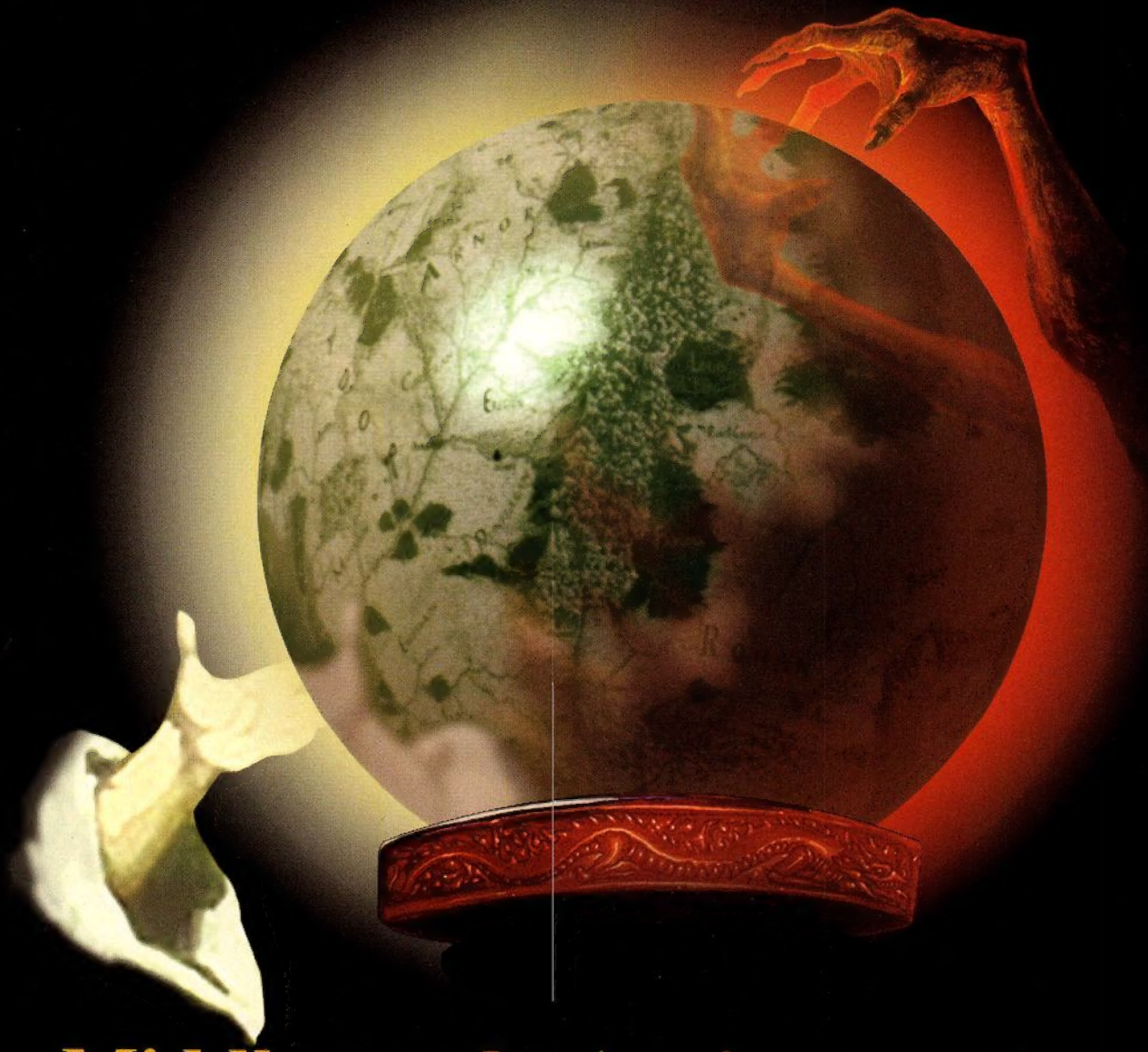
DORK CENTRAL: http://www.msn.fullfeed.com/pegasus/DORKTOWER.HTML

"...Nine Walkers shall be set against the Nine Riders..."

—Elrond
The Fellowship of the Ring



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